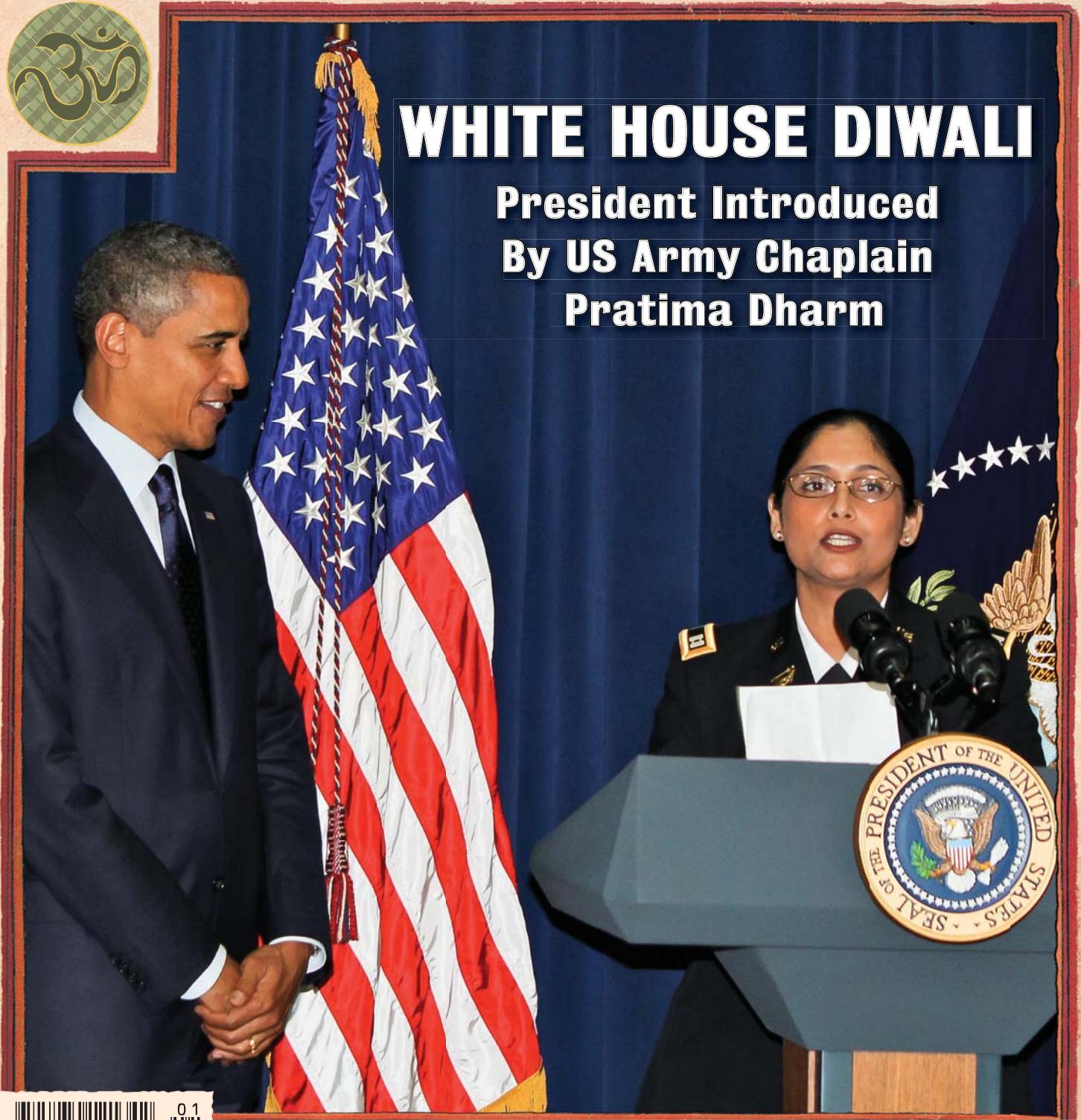




Affirming Sanatana Dharma and Recording the Modern History of a Billion-Strong Global Religion in Renaissance



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COVER: The US military's only Hindu chaplain, Captain Pratima Dharm, introduces President Obama at the White House Diwali Celebration, October 28, 2011; malas of rudraksha beads and semi-precious stones are used for japa yoga, the recitation of mantras

JANUARY/FEBRUARY/MARCH, 2012 • HINDU YEAR 5113  
KHARA, THE YEAR OF HARDSHIP

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Best Hindu Magazine

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## DIGESTS

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# Kerala's Padmanabhaswamy Kshetram: World's Wealthiest Temple?

*July, 2008: thousands of lamps decorate the temple courtyard and gopuram for the spectacular Lakshadeepam festival, held once in six years*



**A court-ordered inventory of the temple vaults revealed a stunning multi-billion-dollar fortune in gold and jewels gifted to the temple over centuries**



Gurkha soldier makes offerings to Lord Ganesha to begin the daily morning worship, with Pundit Shankar Mani standing by

AFGHANISTAN

## British Army Gurkha Bhakti

OUR HINDU GURKHA BROTHERS IN AFGHANISTAN SET AN example for the whole Hindu diaspora with their tent temple in Lakshar Gah, Afghanistan. Members of the 2nd Battalion of the British Royal Gurkha Rifles, originally from Nepal, set up the temple on their second tour, the only one of its kind among Gurkha units. The soldiers perform an arati every morning, with occasional visits by Hindu and Buddhist chaplains. "This is the Goddess Durga," says Lance Corporal Prithvi, pointing to the temple's main Deity. "She represents power. At this moment we pray to Her because we think She gives us power to defeat evil forces."



Thousands of Hindus converge at Shoebury East Beach, Southend-on-Sea, UK. After immersing small Ganesha murtis, devotees raise a flag of His favorite color, red, to mark His return to the Source.

UK

## Ganesha Moksha in England

THE POPULAR FESTIVAL OF Ganesha Visarjana continues to grow worldwide as more and more Hindus gather each year to immerse their beloved Elephant-Faced Deity into the water. It is a powerful moment, a magical metaphor for liberation into the Oneness of Being. One of the biggest events outside of India is held annually 64 kilometers east of London in the popular resort borough, Southend-on-Sea. Feasting and garba dances fill the day with joyful celebration.

about the way men should conduct themselves: protecting the innocent, the helpless, the vulnerable.



# GLOBAL DHARMA



Lord Murugan's vel chariot parades through the streets of Colombo on July 25, 2011. See: [youtu.be/iUaCmTXJWjo](http://youtu.be/iUaCmTXJWjo)

SRI LANKA

## Murugan Still Strong in Lanka

WHEN ETHNIC CIVIL WAR broke out in Sri Lanka in 1983, the government put a moratorium on Hindu festivals in the capital city of Colombo as a security precaution. In 2009 it lifted the ban, and in 2010 the Vel Festival was celebrated for the first time in 26 years. It was celebrated again in 2011, much

to the joy of Tamil Hindus, who have suffered profoundly during the conflict. The Vel procession in Colombo has special significance as it is conducted with participation of the head of state. Muruga's Vel goes from one temple to another, stopping along the way to bless the president and the whole country.

INDIA

## Little Sisters Capture Army

INDIA'S RAKSHA BANDHA custom is spreading all over the world. Literally it means "protective binding." The simple ceremony involves a sister tying a *rakhi* (woven cord) on her brother's wrist. This symbolizes the sister's love and prayers for his well-being, and his lifelong vow to protect her. Over time the custom has broadened to include young women tying a *rakhi* on the wrist of other males with whom they have a brotherly relationship. In a world where war is perpetrated by men, often at the expense of innocent women and children, Raksha Bandha carries a powerful message



With a red wrist string, a young girl binds Indian Border Security Force Deputy Inspector General Sanjeev Bhanot to a promise for him to protect her

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: SGT ALI BASKERVILLE/BRITISH ARMY; M.A. PUSHPA KUMARA/EPA/NEWSCOM; RAMINDER PAL SINGH/EPA/NEWSCOM; CARL HAWKINS/ZUMA PRESS/NEWSCOM



USA

## US Mission Preys on India

IF YOU THINK CONCERN ABOUT Christian missionary aggression is paranoid exaggeration take a look at "Mission India," based in Michigan, USA ([missionindia.org](http://missionindia.org)). One of many similar efforts, it is a sophisticated, multi-million-dollar operation aimed at India and her children. Slick videos contrast a dark picture of India's illiteracy, social injustice, poverty and suffering with a vision of a happy Christianized nation: "God is mobilizing His people in India, using their passion for Jesus to change lives and transform an entire nation."

The business has three products: for \$30 you cover the cost of materials and training for Adult Literacy Classes: "Illiteracy is an epidemic in India. Bible-based Adult Literacy Classes are bringing hope of a brighter future to India's poor." For the record, since independence, the acceleration of literacy in India is unparalleled in history. Today 82 percent of Indians between the ages of 15 and 24 are literate.

For \$2,500 you can "launch a Church Planter on a lifetime of mission work,... providing Indian believers with training and materials to effectively reach



HOME MINISTRIES ABOUT CONTACT US PRAY MEDIA MY ACCOUNT GIVE NOW

Ministries Why India? History Statement of Faith Staff & Board Employment Speakers

## COMMITTED TO CHRIST

Kajir's parents beat her for becoming a Christian. But Kajir's faith in Jesus was stronger than their anger...

CLICK THIS BANNER TO READ THE FULL STORY

### Key to Financial Strength

Discover 4 keys to help you build your financial house on the Rock - [bit.ly/1jC9u0](http://bit.ly/1jC9u0)

### Hungry for a Savior

Dalaja dreamed of being able to go to school, but her mother

### Illiteracy's Curse

Villagers mocked Athalia, saying she was too old to learn to read. But she

As India's laws curtail foreign missionary activity, missionaries are being cultivated within India. The effort results in devastating divides between children & parents, families & community, communities & states.

their nation for Christ." For insights into the psychology of such invasive campaigns, read "Fraudulent Mission," by David Frawley ([bit.ly/fraud-x](http://bit.ly/fraud-x)).

CELEBRITIES

## Bill Clinton: "I'm a Vegan."



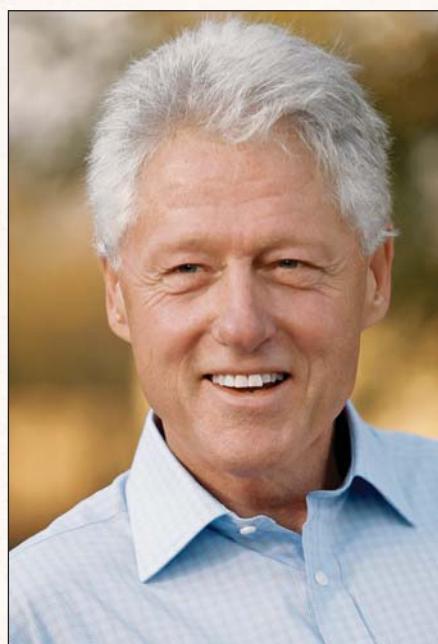
Dr. Tanzi speaks of animal food and Alzheimer's on CNN

"I'M RUDY TANZI, A PROFESSOR of Neurology at Harvard Medical School at Massachusetts General Hospital. What is the one thing that we know from epidemiology studies that reduces the risk of Alzheimer's? It is exercise, movement. Keep moving, keep blood flow going to the brain. This is the best thing you can do. And there is healthy diet. I happen to know that in the animal kingdom, if you look at

hippopotamuses—they don't get Alzheimer's pathology. In the animal kingdom, at least, we see this link between eating animal products, animal fats and the inevitability of Alzheimer's pathology. I am a vegetarian. I'm hoping for the best.

"And it is going to get worse because we are living longer and longer. If we cannot treat this disease at its roots and stop it, this is a tsunami coming. By 2015, Alzheimer's will single-handedly begin to collapse Medicare and Medicaid. That's how prevalent it is. So, we need to do something fast."

Dr. Rudolph Tanzi on CNN. See the entire interview: [bit.ly/ALZ-VEGY](http://bit.ly/ALZ-VEGY)



The new, light-weight, happy, healthy looking, vegan President Clinton

to self-clearing arteries and a long life that will include enjoying his grand children.

President Clinton's decision is a big hit with vegan and vegetarian advocates. Just Google "Clinton Vegan" for an adventure in the celebrity vegan health world.



#### NUTRITION TRENDS

## Plant-Based Diet Gains Ground in USA

Since 1917, when the US issued its first official food guide, meat and dairy have been prominent components of recommended food groups. In the 1956 nutrition guide, they took prime place as two of four food groups, along with fruits and vegetables and grain products. The guide was strongly influenced by pressure from the food manufacturing industry, which began in the late 1800s. In 1977, when fat/cholesterol was officially deemed the bad-health culprit, new Dietary Goals for Americans called for less fat and increased carbohydrates, again with a lot of input from the processed food giants. Between then and 1992, heated debates over the dietary causes

of the heart disease, along with on-going lobbying by the dairy, meat and processed cereal grain producers, led the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) to adopt Sweden's food pyramid as its official guide. That guide still did not reflect scientific research. Sweden, in fact, has a higher heart disease death rate than the US. Fruit and vegetables were minimized, making up a third or less of recommended consumption. This model for nutrition was promoted all over the world.

Then vegetarians and vegans entered the fray with their own pyramids, pushing for a higher percentage of fruit and vegetables in our diets. The Internet opens up a whole new world of

Dr. Joan Sabaté designed the above Loma Linda pyramid (vegetarian plus eggs, and no meat). But he endorses the USDA's circular model (left) as more appropriate than a pyramid, adding, "In the near future we will be revising our graphic to this friendlier format."

greater choice paralysis. Look up "food pyramid," and you find 300,000 images.

In 2010 the USDA revised its pyramid again with the food industry still hard at work to secure a prominent place for their products. Milk, cheese, meat, fish, eggs, bread, cereal, rice and pasta still won a two-thirds share. Meanwhile, the epidemic of heart disease, obesity, diabetes and other diseases widely acknowledged to have roots in our diet, continues unabated.

In a surprise move in early

2011, advocates for a more balanced, healthier diet, with support from Michelle Obama, replaced the food pyramid with a simpler model: the *ChooseMyPlate* icon. Vegetarians may take note that the words *meat, fish, eggs* do not appear. Fruits and vegetables take up 50 percent of the real estate, with dairy set apart as a side dish. Sweets or desserts of any kind are not included, sending an important message about the proper place of sugar in our diet: no place at all.

## BRIEFLY...

### RELIGIOUS SCHOOL HOLIDAYS

debate is heating up across America. Secularists lean to the view that the state cannot teach or support any form of religion. This has led some states to remove all religious holidays from their annual calendar. Other school districts have added more holidays to reflect their multi-ethnic base, and still others are

sticking to holidays for only the Abrahamic majority community.

**THE CALIFORNIA-BASED INSTITUTE** of American Religion released in April what it calls the first every census of Hindus in America. It discovered some 1,600 temples and centers with an estimated 600,000 practicing Hindus. The growth of Hinduism in Ameri-

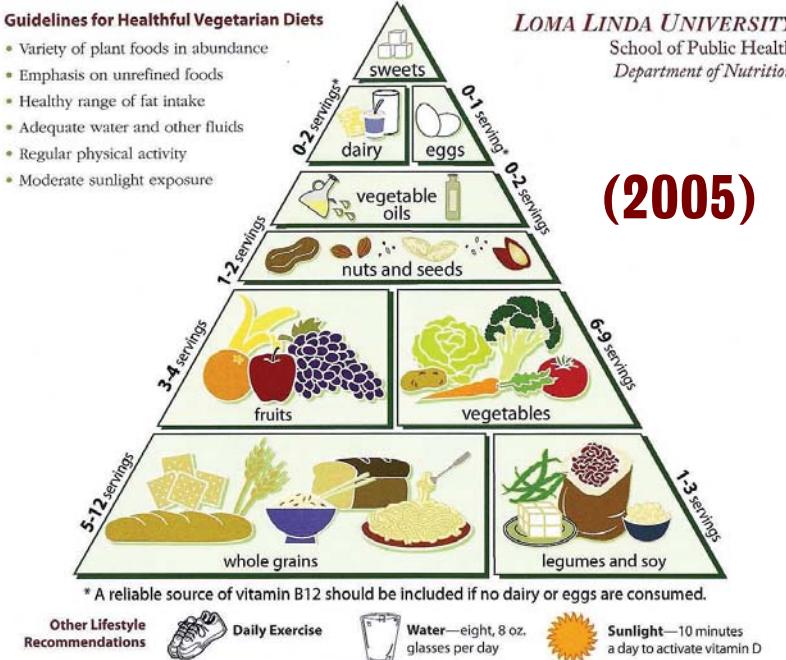
can is attributed to quiet, steady advancement of the Indian Hindu immigrant community. That number could easily rise up to the estimated 1.2 million who self-identify as Hindus in national studies by adding in the mostly Indian Americans who limit their involvement to private spiritual practices or celebrations of semi-

secularized holy days such as Diwali. Westerners who openly declare themselves Hindus form a small fraction of the number.

**Global Dharma news provided by HINDU PRESS INTERNATIONAL**  
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PHOTOS: USDA; LOMA LINDA UNIVERSITY / DEPARTMENT OF NUTRITION

## The Vegetarian Food Pyramid



HINDUISM TODAY was founded on January 5, 1979, by Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami (1927–2001). It is a nonprofit educational activity of Himalayan Academy, with the following purposes: 1. To foster Hindu solidarity as a unity in diversity among all sects

and lineages; 2. To inform and inspire Hindus worldwide and people interested in Hinduism; 3. To dispel myths, illusions and misinformation about Hinduism; 4. To protect, preserve and promote the sacred *Vedas* and the Hindu religion; 5. To nurture and monitor the ongoing spiritual Hindu renaissance; 6. To publish resources for Hindu leaders and educators who promote Sanatana Dharma. Join this seva by sending letters, clippings, photographs, reports on events and by encouraging others.



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## IN MY OPINION

### Steps of Faith

How climbing Tirupati hill helped me realize the driving force behind our accomplishments

BY MEGHANA PISUPATI

THREE THOUSAND FIVE hundred fifty steps of gradual incline. Three to four hours of physical sacrifice. A collection of seven peaks spanning ten square miles of unpolluted land. A total of eight kilometers on a completely uphill path. These enormous numbers seem to be nothing for the countless devotees who climb the Tirupati hill each day

of the year. Their single driving force: faith. Intrigued, I, too, climbed these steps, each one beautifully coated in kumkum and turmeric. Like many other people, we started off from the temple at the base of the mountain. We said a small prayer and embarked upon this strenuous journey. There were stalls with food and drinks along with shade the entire way. The sight was undoubtedly beautiful; the perfection of nature seemed to catch everyone's eye.

Being an athlete, I was able to easily walk the first couple of hills—each step, a means of exercise. Truth be told, I had not come to fulfill a pledge or to mindfully take each footstep in the name of God. Two hours later, when the hard surface of the stone started making my legs sore, and fatigue had hit my body, I wanted to stop; but some unknown force compelled me to make each step, aiding me throughout my journey until the very end.

At the end of the day, it was not my own journey that baffled my mind but the journey of others who had climbed beside me. The countless native Indians who ascend these steps each day have probably never walked such a distance before, nor must they have heard of the concept of stretching or doing exercises in preparation for the trek. I watched with a certain shock as Indians of all ages hiked along, sweat trailing down the sides of faces, some bent over at each step to coat the stone in the precious red and yellow powders, while others were burdened with heavy sacks placed upon their backs or heads. There were elderly people who struggled with each step, grasping the rail-



ing for extra support; while at the same time, children quickly walked up as if the task was not at all difficult.

I wondered about the motivation of these countless people, how they were able to do all that they did. I began to realize that despite the differences in region, wealth and personality, they all had faith in common. Whether theirs was faith in

Lord Venkatesha or another God, in accomplishment of a promise or faith in their own ability to complete the task, I could see it shining in the spirit of each individual beside me. I doubt any believer could clearly explain why or how he believes; but I suppose that when you have faith, you no longer require proof or answers. I think only faith could enable one to endure waiting in an excruciatingly long line that snakes around the temple for twelve hours only to lay eyes on the Lord for a rushed ten seconds, and still come away from the pilgrimage with the euphoric, content feeling typical of these devotees. And then, despite the countless distractions during that brief ten-second darshan, the only thing on a devotee's mind is God and nothing else.

Because of this life-altering experience, it has become clear to me why people are so determined to accomplish a task. I have come to realize that throughout the visible universe of material things and in the invisible universe of the human soul, there is only one thing powerful enough to fully control the body, mind and consciousness. I have found that this force is one which is predominant in each and every one of us. Despite whether people call it faith, God or potential, it is the sole reason that drives humans to accomplish infinite feats. One of the many demonstrations of this force is found within each and every step taken by a faithful pilgrim upon that tall mountain.

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## PUBLISHER'S DESK

# Improving Our Character

If we start at the beginning and work systematically, we can replace undesirable qualities with their opposites

BY SATGURU BODHINATHA VEYLANSWAMI

**S**PIRITUAL LIFE IS NOT DIFFERENT FROM THE rest of life, it is just the best of life. Imagine a woman hears that Ramakrishna saw God as clearly as we see an apple in our hand, or a man hears of great yogis who realize the Truth of the universe in a life-transforming avalanche of light culminating in a sense of the oneness of it all. Seeing this, the man or woman might decide to meditate for days under a tree or in a cave. Or they might fast for days, go on arduous pilgrimages and practice mystic mantras for hours on end. Would they succeed by these efforts? Experience says probably not.

Real life offers a key for their journey. Imagine someone who goes to a piano concert and hears the world's greatest artist. The music is mesmerizing, the pianist's skill is flawless, soaring, perfect, and our listener decides, "This is my path. This is what I want to do." He sits at the piano, attempting to equal the master's work, but great music does not resound. No matter how many hours are spent, no matter how sincere the effort, he cannot achieve what he heard at the concert.

Why? He does not realize the work required to reach that level of expertise. To be successful, it is vital to start at the beginning of the path, not in the middle or at the end. If the fundamentals are skipped, our efforts will not yield sustainable spiritual progress. In the case of the pianist, the fundamentals are music theory, neural and muscular training, development of memorization, cultivating an interpretive ear and practice, practice, practice. It is no different in spiritual life. The great ones did not sit in a cave and in a short time attain enlightenment. They worked on themselves for years, decades. They did sadhana, they changed their habits, their desires, their reactions, their very character. If we wish to achieve what they achieved, we must do the same. We must work for it.

The fundamentals, the foundation upon which our spiritual growth rests, is our character. What exactly is character? Character is the sum total of mental and moral qualities distinctive to an individual. On the spiritual path, the first phase of effort is to build, improve and transform our character. My guru, Sivaya Subramuniyaswami, observed:

"It is true that bliss comes from meditation, and it is true that higher consciousness is the heritage of all mankind. However, the ten restraints [yamas] and their corresponding practices [niyamas] are necessary to maintain bliss consciousness, as well as all of the good feelings toward oneself and others attainable in any incarnation. These restraints and practices build character. Character is the foundation for spiritual unfoldment. The fact is, the higher we go, the lower we can fall. The top chakras spin fast; the lowest one available to us spins even faster. The platform of character must be built



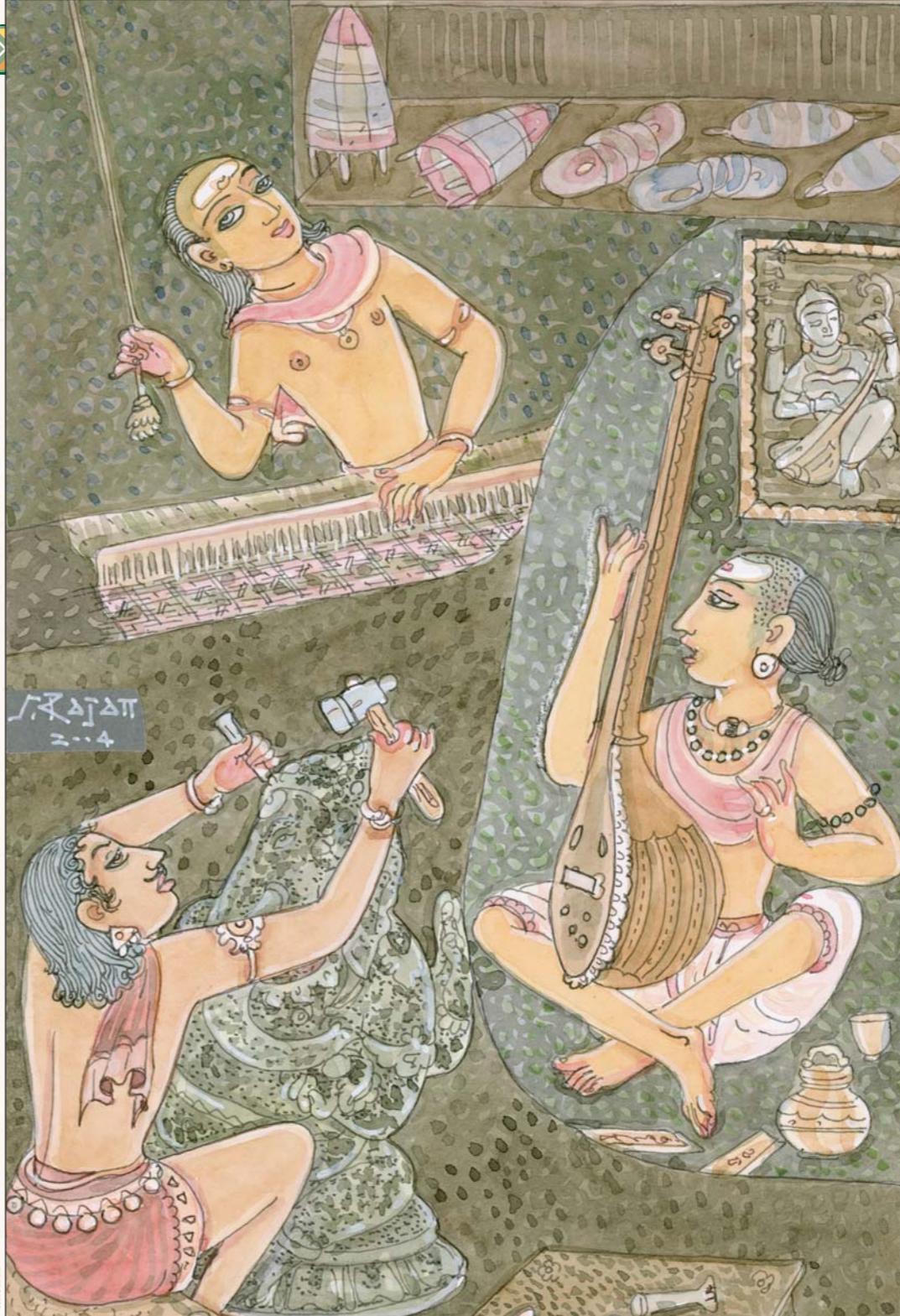
within our lifestyle to maintain the total contentment needed to persevere on the path. These great rishis saw the frailty of human nature and gave these guidelines, or disciplines, to make it strong. They said, 'Strive!' Let's strive to not hurt others, to be truthful and honor all the rest of the virtues they outlined."

Swami Chinmayananda, founder of Chinmaya Mission, directly related spiritual growth to character transformation: "If we organize our life in such a way so as to discover the great potential within us, and if we order our behavior so as to nurture and nourish that potential, our life will be well spent. Our success lies in the amount of transformation we can bring about in our character and behavior."

My guru explained, "To build character, to act in accordance with the yamas, a person has to realize that, having acted instinctively, he experienced consequences that he does not want to experience again; so, now he realizes that he should follow these restraints and not go through those consequences again. This is the foundation; without this foundation there is no spiritual growth, no fruit. Trying to realize the highest realizations before laying this foundation would be like taking a lime tree that was cut off from its roots and putting it into a bucket and expecting it to bear fruit. Of course it will not."

Each of us has many character qualities. A character quality is a habit, a usual pattern or way of thinking, speaking or acting. Most people have a mixture of positive character qualities (such as being enthusiastic, punctual, dependable, kindly or sincere) and negative qualities (such as being sarcastic, lazy, tardy or deceptive).

We have all heard the common excuse for negative character qualities: "That's the way I am. What can I do about it? I'm simply a lazy person." Hinduism teaches that the character we are born with in this life is the result of the sum total of our actions in previous lives. Some individuals are clearly pious from birth, others are of a mixed nature and still others are self-centered and devious. However, Hinduism also teaches that we can change the character qualities we are born with through self-reflection and self-effort, by observing and controlling how we think and act in the present, particularly by the repetition of positive thoughts and actions. The more often we express and reflect on the character quality



S. RAJAM

we desire to cultivate, the stronger it will become.

Accepting the idea that we can change a negative character quality, such as laziness, is a necessary first step. Once that perspective is held, the following four-step approach to developing the opposing positive character quality is helpful:

1. Understand the positive quality
2. Cognize its expressions
3. Realize its benefits
4. Practice its expressions

**Building character:** Three men exemplify the quality of industriousness, perfecting the arts of weaving, stone carving and playing the tambura

In utilizing this process, we can keep in mind the following principle from Patanjali's *Yoga Sutras*: "For the repelling of unwholesome thoughts, their opposites should be cultivated. Unwholesome thoughts, such as harming someone and so forth—whether done, caused to be done, or approved, whether arising from greed, anger or infatuation, whether mild, moderate or extreme—never cease to ripen into ignorance and suffering. This is why one must cultivate their opposites."

Let's see how this four-step process can be utilized to replace laziness with industriousness.

**First: Understand the Positive Quality.** Make sure you have a clear understanding of the character quality you wish to cultivate. A good way to approach this is to define it in your own words. Let us define industriousness as "hard-working, willing to work long hours to finish a project." Its opposite, laziness, is "a disinclination to work hard, preferring to remain idle." Then meditate on the positive quality.

**Second: Cognize its Expressions.** Make a list of thoughts, words, attitudes and behaviors that are representative of people who possess the positive quality. Then make a parallel list for the opposite trait.

INDUSTRIOUSNESS	LAZINESS
Do the task now	Postpone the task
Work late to finish	Stop as early as possible
Maximize productivity	Do the minimum

**Third: Realize its Benefits.** List the benefits of having the quality. This can include insights into the problems caused when its opposite is followed.

**INDUSTRIOUSNESS**  
Greater ability to serve family and community  
Opportunities for career advancement  
Appreciation from associates  
Enhanced self-esteem  
Avoid criticism

Scripture can provide insights. The *Tirukural* offers valuable thoughts on industriousness, saying, "Good fortune of its own accord ferrets out and finds the man of unflagging energy." Of laziness it warns: "Procrastination, forgetfulness, sloth and sleep—these four shape the ship bearing those destined for ruin."

**Fourth: Practice its Virtues:** Begin to regularly practice the actions that will develop the habit pattern of the positive character quality. Observe closely as to begin to experience the benefits that result. Set

realistic goals. Be careful not to set the goal too high, lest you fall short, become discouraged and give up the effort. For the quality of industriousness, focus on increasing your productivity for the day by five percent. This can be accomplished by working faster, working longer or a combination of both.

Slowly, character will evolve and the many traits that define you will be transformed, bringing a deeper spirituality and a more secure material existence to your daily life. Remember: Consistency is the key to the conquest of karma.

## LETTERS

### Chinese Yogis Love HT

The 2011 China-India Yoga Summit was the biggest yoga event ever in China and turned out to be a great success. This summit signifies profound significance for Chinese yoga. HINDUISM TODAY receives high compliments in this circle; the articles in it are so excellent that in our opinion they will prove to be an asset to Chinese yoga practitioners. So, we would like to translate some articles from your magazine from time to time and release them on our website and in our magazine. It is, in our opinion, a good opportunity to bring your ideas and values to Chinese yogis.

NIKI SU, GUANGZHOU, GUANGDONG, CHINA  
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### Monks with Macs

Thank you for taking the time to acknowledge the mahasamadhi of Steve Jobs (Hindu Press International, Oct 5, 2011). It is good that HINDUISM TODAY is not so wrapped up in its mission and can take the time to recognize a great soul in another setting. Steve Jobs gave the world a shining example of originality. I, too, wish him well in the next stage of his development.

PETER BEACHAM, OTTAWA, ONTARIO, CANADA  
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### Mystic Union with God

In "Four Questions People Ask About Hinduism" (Oct/Nov/Dec 2011), the following statement is made: "...and the flower of yoga, mystical union with God, is Hindu." Is it the author's intention to say that mystical union is found only within Hinduism? While not mainstream and sometimes considered absolutely heretical, mystical union is certainly found in all three Western religions as well as, with different terminology and a

### Annual Statement of Ownership

Statement of ownership, management, and circulation (required by USPS DMM 70783) of Hinduism Today, published four times a year at 107 Kaholalele RD, Kapaa, HI 96746-9304, for October 1, 2011. General business offices of the publisher are located at 107 Kaholalele RD, Kapaa, HI 96746-9304. Name and address of publisher is Swami Bodhinatha Veylan, 107 Kaholalele RD, Kapaa, HI 96746-9304. Name and address of editor is Swami Sadasivanatha Palaniswami, 107 Kaholalele RD, Kapaa, HI 96746-9304. Name and address of managing editor is Swami Arumugam Katir, 107 Kaholalele RD, Kapaa, HI 96746-9304. Owner is Himalayan Academy, 107 Kaholalele RD, Kapaa, HI 96746-9304. There are no known bondholders, mortgagees, or other security holders owning or holding 1 percent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities. The average number of copies of each issue during the preceding 12 months is: (a) Total number of copies printed: 13,111; (b) Paid circulation: (1) Sales through dealers and carriers, street vendors, and counter sales: 5,620; (2) Paid or requested mail subscriptions: 3,751; (c) Total paid and/or requested circulation: 9,371; (d) Free distribution by mail: 849; (e) Free distribution outside the mail: 1,080; (f) Total free distribution: 1,929; (g) Total distribution: 11,300 (h) Copies not distributed: (1) Office use, leftovers, spoiled: 1,811; (2) Return from news agents: not applicable; (i) Total: 12,511; Percent paid and/or requested circulation: 82.93%. The actual number of copies of single issue published nearest to filing date is: (a) Total number of copies printed: 12,511; (b) Paid circulation: (1) Sales through dealers and carriers, street vendors, and counter sales: 5,166; (2) Paid or requested mail subscriptions: 3,902; (c) Total paid and/or requested circulation: 9,068; (d) Free distribution by mail: 869; (e) Free distribution outside the mail: 986; (f) Total free distribution: 1,855; (g) Total distribution: 10,923; (h) Copies not distributed: (1) Office use, leftovers, spoiled: 1,588; (2) Return from news agents: not applicable; (i) Total: 12,511; Percent paid and/or requested circulation: 83.02%. I certify that all information furnished above is true and complete. I understand that anyone who furnishes false or misleading information on this statement or who omits material or information requested on the statement may be subject to criminal sanctions (including fines and imprisonment) and/or civil sanctions (including multiple damages and civil penalties).

Swami Durganatha Shanmuga, Administrator.



different philosophical basis, in Buddhism and Taoism.

ALAN RUBINSTEIN, ORACLE, ARIZONA, USA  
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*No, we are not saying that union with God is found only within Hinduism. You are right: mystical union with the Absolute is found in many traditions throughout the world.*

### Eating Is Sacred

I love the article, "The Sacred Act of Eating" (Apr/May/Jun 2011). The message is practical. The joys of mindful eating are something that the pace of our hectic societies have made very alien for many. An excellent, thought-provoking reminder here!

SERAJ, [COMMENT VIA HINDUISMTODAY.COM](http://HINDUISMTODAY.COM)

### Animal Sacrifice in the Vedas

However the Vedas may be understood, animal sacrifice is not an acceptable practice in our times! Countless animal welfare activists are working overtime on legal battles in India, as sacrifice is actually against the current animal welfare laws there.

EILEEN WEINTRAUB  
PRESIDENT/FOUNDER, HELP ANIMALS INDIA  
SEATTLE, WASHINGTON, USA  
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### Much Ado About Christmas

Thank you for the article, "Much Ado About Christmas" (Oct/Nov/Dec 2009). My five-year-old son wanted a Christmas tree, and my wife bought a small, artificial one despite my protest. Then I told my son to call it Kalpavriksham ["wish-fulfilling"] instead of Christmas tree. The irony is that he never even looked at the box after we bought it. Time to return it.

RAVI KIRAN, [VIA HINDUISMTODAY.COM](http://HINDUISMTODAY.COM)

*Read about Pancha Ganapati, a five-day holiday ending on December 25, conceived of by HINDUISM TODAY founder Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami in 1995, now celebrated by Hindus around the world: [bit.ly/pancha\\_ganapati](http://bit.ly/pancha_ganapati)*

### Vardhanti Versus Jayanti

There is a grave error in your article on the "Hindu of the Year 2011" (Oct/Nov/Dec 2011): "The 60th birthday is also called the 61st Vardhanti..." *Vardhanti* means death anniversary. *Jayanti* is birth anniversary. Thank you for your kind attention to this urgent matter. I read HINDUISM TODAY regularly and have tremendous respect for all of you.

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*Institutions, we found, use the two words variously. A spokesman at Sringeri Sharada Peetham responds: Vardhanti comes from the Sanskrit root, vridha, which lends to forms such as vardhate, meaning "to grow," "to increase." So, 61st Vardhanti (60th birthday) means the completion of 60 years and the day on which the 61st year "grows" or commences. The term Vardhanti is used when a Mahapurusha is physically present. The word Jayanti comes from the Sanskrit root ji, meaning to be victorious. It is used to glorify the birthday of an incarnation/Mahapurusha who is no longer physically present. Sri Krishna Jayanti, Sri Shankara Jayanti as well as Jayantis of previous Acharyas of Sringeri are examples of the popular usage.*

Dr. Shiva Bajpai remarks that the usage of these two terms varies in different regions throughout India, as well as among various Hindu sects.

### Questions About Hinduism

I am a docent with the Friends of the Museums in Singapore, and I am a guide at the Asian Civilizations Museum. I would like to let you know that we used the booklets "Ten Questions People Ask About Hinduism" and "Visiting a Hindu Temple" during our training as museum guides and found them extremely useful. Thank you.

SINDHU RAGHAVENDRA, SINGAPORE  
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Recently at the Hindu Mandir Executives' conference at Columbus, Ohio, September 23-25, 2011, I attended the lecture by your editor-in-chief on "14 Questions People Ask About Hinduism." It was impressive. Many took a copy of the booklet for themselves and one or two more for their children. Later, several of my friends and I raised more questions, among them: 1) Why do Hindus build lavish, costly temples, such as the Swaminarayan mandirs and the Sripuram golden temple? God is everywhere, and Hinduism teaches simplicity. When we enter such costly temples do we go there to worship or admire the beauty and the marvelous architecture of the temple? 2) Why do we need rituals? Nowadays temples charge Rs 10,000 to 50,000 for yagnas, and the charges for Satyanarayana

puja at home by a priest are outrageous. Do we need such costly pujas for the self-satisfaction that God will protect us?

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[AUMBALA@YAHOO.COM](mailto:AUMBALA@YAHOO.COM)

We asked Agamic scholar Dr. S.P. Sabharathnam Sivachariyar to respond to your questions. He had this to say:

1) No doubt, simplicity is the very breath of Hinduism. Simplicity is to be maintained whether we worship in temples or in home shrines. But simplicity does not restrict us from building a large temple. Temples in Chidambaram, Thiruvannamalai, Madurai and other sacred places are large. Based on fundamental and changeless metaphysical principles, every part of their architecture has profound meaning, reflecting the harmony and orderliness of the vast universe. We can

not consider any aspect of them unwanted or unnecessary; every part of the temple is in proportion to all other parts. Thus, such meaningful construction cannot be considered lavish or extravagant. Essential ornaments made of gold and diamonds have been prescribed for the purpose of festivals, which are conducted for the benefit of the world and society and for the maintenance of the ecosystem. Apart from these, there is no need to amass valuable ornaments on a large scale inside temples.

The question of the need for temples when in fact God is everywhere has been raised

and answered in the Kamika Agama: Water is everywhere beneath the Earth, but a well or tank is necessary to easily access the water. Similarly, a temple serves as a portal for the devotee to commune with God.

2) A ritual is a technical activity that leads the devotee step by step to close proximity with the Deity. It is a technique provided for the devotee, not for God, who is ever-content. Rituals should be performed as prescribed in the scriptures. In home shrines, rituals need not be performed on a large scale; they can be as simple as possible. In a home shrine, a priest is not necessary. After learning the process well, any member of the family can perform the concerned ritual. A priest should not claim significant fees beyond the means of the devotee, only those necessary according to the nature of the rituals. Likewise, a devotee should not hesitate to offer what he can according to his means, with happiness and fullness of heart. Thus offered, the priest should accept the dakshina, even if it is minimal, with contentment and satisfaction and bless the devotee wholeheartedly. All such details have been given in the Agamas.

Letters with writer's name, address and daytime phone number should be sent to:

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Letters may be edited for space and clarity and may appear in electronic versions of HINDUISM TODAY.

## "This Is the Way I Want to Be"

### How I help Hinduism touch more lives, as it has mine

**G**ANGA SIVANATHAN, A MANAGEMENT consultant living in Adelaide, Australia, discovered Hinduism by accident in the 1990s. She went to India for a short business trip, and, as she explains, "Though I should have felt a stranger, I found myself profoundly at home. Looking at the people, I realized this is the way I want to be, this is how I want to look at life. I suddenly knew what was important, and it rocked me to the core." Ten years later, she returned to India on pilgrimage. "The experience was shattering to my old self. I came back so deeply moved I could not speak about it for a long time."

When she later discovered HINDUISM TODAY, those intangible feelings became pillars of understanding and conviction. She eventually changed her name, fully embraced Hinduism and began to practice sadhana daily. "My profession has me on

the road most of the time, and asks me to deal ever with complex difficulties, one after another. So, it is critical for me to retain focus. That is why I always carry HINDUISM TODAY with me. It helps me stay in touch."

Ganga now donates a fixed amount each month to the Hinduism Today Production Fund, which is a part of Hindu Heritage Endowment. "I know what it takes to maintain a project such as HINDUISM TODAY, one that is called upon to grow and enlighten ever more souls, as it does and has done for me."

Please consider donating to the Hinduism Today Production Fund at [www.hheonline.org/donate/pf](http://www.hheonline.org/donate/pf). Read about the fund at [www.hheonline.org/productionfund](http://www.hheonline.org/productionfund). Subscribe to the Production Fund e-newsletter at: [www.gurudeva.org/email-news](http://www.gurudeva.org/email-news). Call 1-808-634-5407 or email [hhe@hindu.org](mailto:hhe@hindu.org).



"I've been impressed with the extraordinary role the magazine plays in so many people's lives!" (top) Ganga with a fellow pilgrim in South India in 2004; (above) Receiving blessings at Tiruvannamalai.

## QUOTES & QUIPS

### Yoga is the restraint of the modifications of the mind.

**Patanjali** (2nd century BCE), Indian author of the *Yoga Sutras*

It's important to go into solitude from time to time and think about God, especially for those who busy themselves day and night with worldly duties and responsibilities. When the plant is young, it should be fenced on all sides, otherwise goats and cattle may eat it up. **Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa** (1836–1886)

There is no place more powerful for practice, more blessed or more marvelous than Mount Kailash. **Milarepa** (c.1052–1135), *Tibet's most revered yogi*

A happy man is he who desires nothing, claims nothing, expects nothing and is free from hatred and fear. **Dada Vaswani**, leader of the *Sadhu Vaswani Mission*

The heart does not talk, it is the intellect that does all the talking. We have become

like machines. Life has lost its naturalness, like a garland of plastic flowers. Only when hearts come together does true life blossom. **Mata Amritanandamayi**, mystic and hugging saint, *Hindu of the Year 1993*

The ocean of life contains all, not only humans. To reach it, abandon all self-identification, stop thinking of yourself as such-and-such, as this or that. Abandon all self-concern, every desire; stop thinking of achievements of any kind. You are complete here and now; you need absolutely nothing. **Nisargadatta Maharaj** (1897–1981), Hindu sage

Don't open your diamonds in a vegetable market. Tie them in a bundle, keep them in your heart and go your own way. **Kabir** (1440–1518), *Indian Saint*

It is impossible not to be astonished by India. Nowhere on Earth does humanity present itself in such a dizzying, creative burst of cultures and religions, races and tongues. It is this variety which provides a breathtaking ensemble for experiences that is uniquely Indian. Perhaps the only thing more difficult than to be indifferent to India would be to describe or understand India completely. *From the travel book, A Rough Guide to India*

There can be no keener revelation of a society's soul than the way in which it treats its children. **Nelson Mandela**, president of South Africa and Nobel laureate

With a smile I faced all hardships. **Swami Sivananda** (1887–1963), founder of the *Divine Life Society*

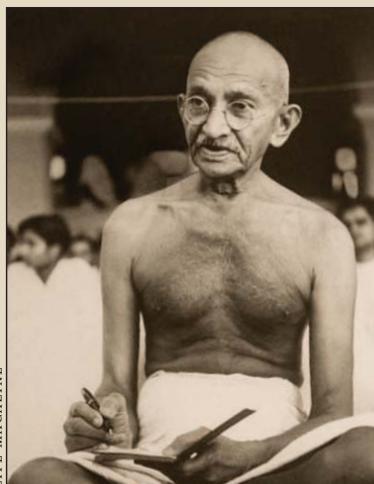
#### DID YOU KNOW?

### Gandhi's Actual Words

THE FATHER OF MODERN INDIA, MOHANDAS K. GANDHI, WAS A giant in both spirit and intellect. He distilled many of Hinduism's principles into speeches, sayings and actions that were plain for anyone to understand. A master craftsman of words with a solid education, Gandhi spoke carefully, and well. Then again, there are those famous things he never said.

In the fast-paced age of the Internet, where catchy phrases can go viral and attention span is shorter than ever, a misattributed quote travels faster than wildfire, making it almost impossible to correct. Some misquotations are benign, faithful summaries of a longer thought; others can be clumsy, flat-out wrong or anachronistic. Einstein and Gandhi are perhaps the two names most often undersigned to things they never said.

In an article that appeared in *Harjan* in



LIFE MAGAZINE

1940, the Mahatma wrote, "Often my articles suffer from condensation; they are made to yield a meaning I had never intended."

A well-known quote of Gandhi in our time, "Be the change you want to see in the world," may be true to his spirit, but not to his writings. The closest recorded excerpt is fittingly more thoughtful and Gandhian: "If we could change ourselves, the tendencies in the world would also change. As a man changes his own nature, so does the attitude of the world change towards him. We need not wait to see what others do."

Still, this is by no means a new phenomenon, though the advent of the Web has given it unprecedented reach and speed. The immortal inscription on the portico of Greece's Delphic Oracle, "Know Thyself," was even in those times attributed alternatively to Pythagoras, Socrates or Thales—but it may well have come first from India.

In Hinduism, truth is far more important than the bearers of truth, and attribution may seem like a trifle. It might, however, be good to follow that recommendation Gandhiji made in 1946, "Google the quotes you plan to go on repeating, just in case." Or did he say that?



Belief in rebirth is self-evident to many in India. It is not a thesis to be proved, but a fact to be elaborated. **Arvind Sharma**, Professor, McGill University

No matter how much you push the envelope, it will still be stationery.

People think that what they don't know gets them into trouble. Actually, it is what they think they know that causes problems.

For creative breakthroughs, the relaxation phase is crucial. That's why so many insights happen during warm showers... One of the surprising lessons of the latest neuroscience

research is that trying to force an insight can actually prevent it from happening. **Jonah Lehrer**, Science Journalist

The difference between science and art is that if I had never lived, someone else would eventually have made my discoveries. But if Beethoven had never lived, no one would have written Opus 111. **Werner Heisenberg** (1901–1976), German theoretical physicist

Time flies like an arrow. Fruit flies like a banana.

Hinduism is ultimately about experiencing

things yourself. Understanding another person's wisdom does not make one wise. **Satguru Bodhinatha Veylanswami**, publisher of HINDUISM TODAY

No one can describe the Truth adequately. Even the great Shankara failed to do it. **Satguru Siva Yogaswami** (1872–1964), Sri Lankan mystic

It is only through sadhana that you will be able to prudently delineate between true intuition and the feelings of need and greed from the externalities of your instinctive nerve system. **Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami** (1927–2001)

#### BASICS OF HINDUISM

### Relation to Other Faiths

THE VEDAS CLEARLY STATE, "TRUTH IS ONE, BUT SAGES CALL IT by many names." Hindus know this profound truth from which stems compassion, understanding, respect—and strength. For Hindus, the right attitude toward other faiths is genuine respect, not condescending tolerance.

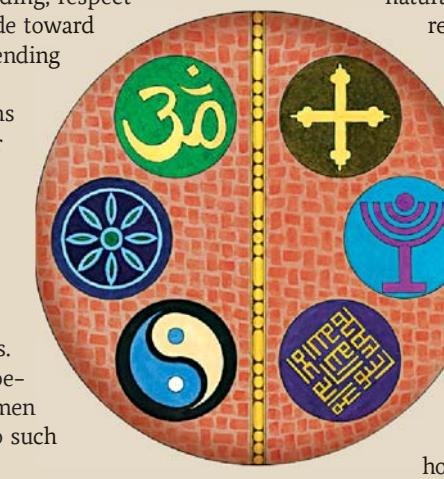
Acceptance of the existence of many paths leading to God does not weaken a Hindu, for if other methods are true, so is his timeless Hindu faith. That shields the devotee from conversion attempts by religions with a narrow view, those claiming exclusive rights to God.

Hindus properly respect and address virtuous persons of all spiritual traditions. They do not disparage other faiths, their beliefs, Gods, sacred sites, scriptures or holy men and women. They even refuse to listen to such talk.

"Solidarity in diversity" is a better term than unity in diversity, and the mosaic is a more accurate metaphor than the "melting pot." There is no reason, other than narrowmindedness, that the major religions, and the major Hindu sects, cannot live in harmony in India, America and the other countries of the world.

The diversity of Earth's religious landscape is healthy and natural. Sameness would not bring about peace, but respect and acceptance could. Sameness would only reduce that which is vital with variation, rich in philosophical perspective and sublime culture, to a one common denominator. Hindus take pride in the broadness in their faith and honor the panorama of religious thought in today's world.

The same generous attitude that Hindus have toward other religions is also characteristic among Hinduism's many denominations and sects. Devout practitioners Hindus love and accept those of all sects, be they Saiva, Smarta, Shakta or Vaishnava Hindus. They wisely uphold harmony by not dwelling on differences.



A. MANIVEL

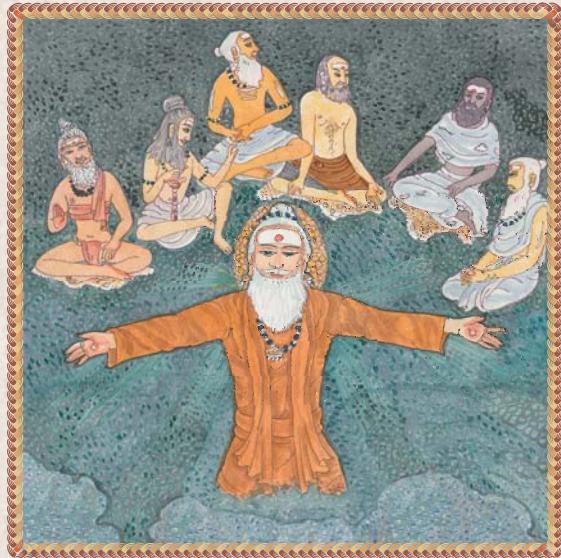
**new!**

# How Enlightened Men Live

## The Guru Chronicles

THE MAKING OF THE FIRST AMERICAN SATGURU

By the Swamis of Kauai's Hindu Monastery



The illustrated stories of Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami, his guru Siva Yogaswami and five preceding masters, who all held truth in the palm of their hand and inspired slumbering souls to "Know thy Self"

**"Just now I completed the reading of the most powerful *Guru Chronicles*. What a rewarding experience! The design, contents and presentation of the most powerful book to awaken, most wonderful to inspire and the most informative to instill constant devotion to the eternal Guru Parampara are indeed superb and praiseworthy."** DR. S.P. SABHARATHNAM, CHENNAI

**"Deeply captivating. The book has a musical magic, a beautifully lyrical story that happens at once in the past and the present, with the promise of an ever-deepening future of awakening for the reader. It brings so vibrantly to life the simple life and deep spiritual culture of India and Sri Lanka. S. Rajam's art adds to the musical quality, as his work is rhythmic and lyrical, too."** GAYATRI RAJAN, CALIFORNIA

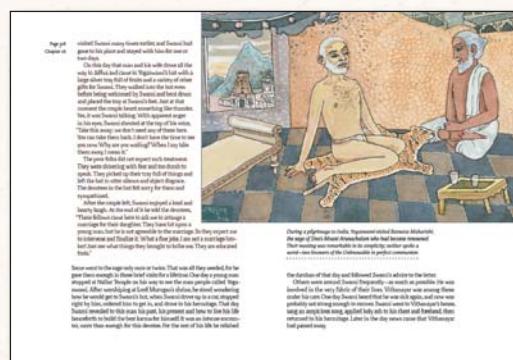
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Here is an adventure into the rarely divulged world of spiritual masters, full of extraordinary stories, insights and spiritual encounters. At its heart is the untold life of Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami, who founded HINDUISM TODAY, his guru Siva Yogaswami and five preceding masters of the spiritual lineage. Illustrated by the South Indian genius, S. Rajam.



FROM THE AGAMAS

## Placement of Deities within a Village

Understanding the differing benefits of worship of each Divinity

The following text is excerpted from the *Kriya Pada* of Kamika Agama, chapter 26, part of a long series of chapters detailing village and town planning. Historically, the Indus Valley civilization is the first to have engaged in comprehensive town design.

**N**OW I WILL SPEAK ON THE APPROPRIATE LOCATION FOR THE Deities to be allocated in villages, towns and other settlements according to the system maintained traditionally from the remote past. The location for Vishnu is the northeast of the village center. In the west, on the north side of the east-west line, a place for the temple of Siva is to be allocated. The temple of Siva may be in the middle of the village, or in the northeast or in any of the eight directions of the village. The village in which temples for both Vishnu and Siva have been built is a place of celebrity and auspiciousness. The village which has a Siva temple alone is with much divinity and uniqueness. The location for all other Deities could be allocated from the places recommended in the *Agamas* as desired by devotees and experts. Such places are now being told in this *Agama*.

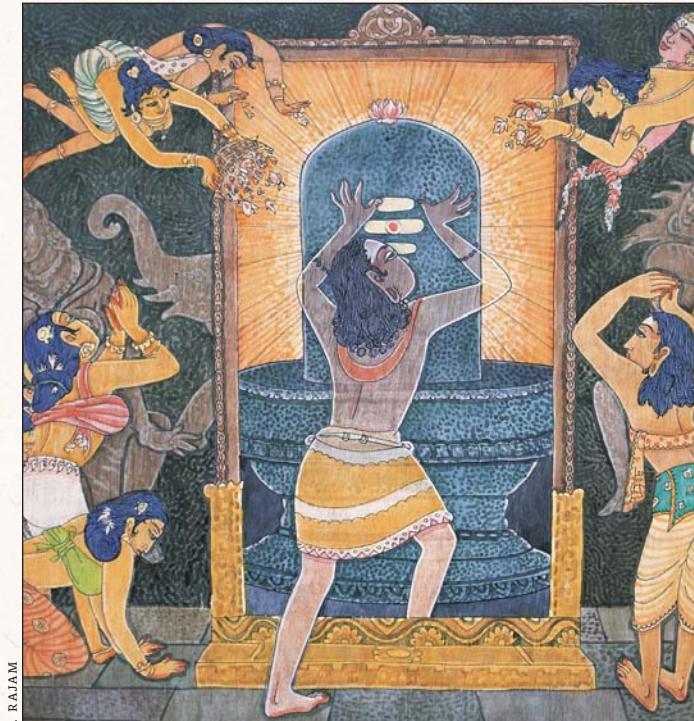
The location for the shrine of the Sun should be in the West or East or between the east and the northeast. The same places are recommended for the shrine of Indra also. The location for the shrine of Shanmukha should be in the west or east. In this *Agama*, it is maintained that the location for the shrine of Ganesha should be in the west or southwest or between the northwest and the north. The location for Ganesha may be in other directions also.

The location for the Goddess Durga is said to be in the south or southwest or northwest; it may also be between the east and the northeast, or between the south and the southwest. O Sages deeply devoted to Lord Siva, the location for the shrine of Sarasvati is to be in the west.

The shrine for the seven Mother Goddesses is to be in the northeast or north, or in between the northeast and the north. The location for the shrine of the Goddess Motika (a form of Kali) is to be in the southeast. The same location is recommended for the shrine of Kamadeva. The Goddess Jyeshta is to be installed near the bank of the temple tank, or may be installed in some other place outside the temple.

The location recommended for the seven Goddesses is also applicable to Skanda. The location allocated for Skanda is also applicable to Kamadeva and Surya. For all Deities who are not mentioned here, the location may be allocated as desired by the experts. In a village where more than 1,000 brahmins live, there may be a temple for Vishnu at the center of that village. With regard to the village specifically dedicated to the worship of Siva, the exact rules and regulations for the rituals, such as installation and so forth, should not be ascertained by scriptures other than the *Saiva Agamas*.

The daily worship of Vishnu creates the welfare and healthy growth of the people. The daily worship of Surya nullifies any unfavorable effects inflicted by the planets. The worship of Indra bestows valor and efficacy upon the people. The daily worship of Skanda will bring into effect all the best things to the youngsters. The worship of Shasta (Ayappan) inspires and impels the people of the village to accomplish the works undertaken by them.



**Daily worship:** The Kamika Agama prescribes regular worship of Lord Siva to bring auspicious and eternal benefits

The worship of Kamadeva bestows elegance and gracefulness to all those who are living in the village or city. The worship of Uma, Siva-Sakti, appreciably bestows commendable success in all the endeavors. If Motika is duly worshiped, She becomes favorably disposed to ward off the diseases which afflict children. By the worship of Lord Ganesha, all the works undertaken by the people get accomplished without any impediment.

The worship of Jyeshta (sister of Goddess Lakhmi) enables Her to be favorably disposed to ward off diseases which would afflict the village. The worship of Lakshmi bestows riches and wealth upon the people. It also drives away misfortune and poverty.

The worship of Sarasvati constantly bestows eloquence and command of language. O twice-born sages, the worship of the seven Goddesses continuously yields all prosperity and success.

Lord Maheshvara, Siva, abundantly bestows all auspicious benefits that are obtainable by the worship of all other Deities. Therefore, Lord Siva is to be worshiped daily by all those who are desirous of auspicious and eternal benefits.

DR. S. P. SABHARATHNAM SIVACHARYAR, of the Adisaiva priest lineage, is an expert in ancient Tamil and Sanskrit, specializing in the *Vedas*, *Agamas* and *Shilpa Shastras*. This excerpt is from his recent translation of the *Kamika Agama*.

# Kailash Yatra

**Your Complete Guide**

A step-by-step manual on  
how to prepare for (and  
survive) a pilgrimage to  
Siva's most sacred mountain

ALL PHOTOS SHUTTERSTOCK

## SPECIAL FEATURE

**W**HO AMONG SIVA'S DEVOTEES COULD SAY HE NEVER wanted to visit Mount Kailash, God's eternal abode? In a religion that sees God everywhere, in some places the Divine is even more present. Enshrined in the Sivalingam-shaped summit is Siva the yogi, attentive to the spiritual aspirations of His devotees. HINDUISM TODAY brings you the account of a bhaktar

who traveled to the Himalayas to walk the most sacred Kailash Yatra. He shares knowledge about packing lists, shady tour deals, fury yaks, marauder monkeys, sadhana tips and reflections on Siva. His meticulously detailed report will make you feel you are there, feet freezing, heart throbbing, blessings abounding. With these guidelines, maybe the next pilgrim will be you.



T.S. Mohan, PhD, left behind his busy life as an IT expert in Bengaluru to go on one of Earth's most sacred pilgrimages: the Kailash Yatra. Here is his personal account.

BY DR. T.S. MOHAN, BENGALURU

**S**INCE BEFORE RECORDED HISTORY, the people of India have poured their sincere devotion at the feet of Lord Siva. Sages, saints and ordinary devotees have long undertaken pilgrimages to places where His power shines bright, sites of mystical communion and intense religious practices. Siva's abode in Mount Kailash is one of these destinations—maybe the most idyllic of them all, a mountain shaped in the form of a Sivalinga that is said to be God's home.

Mount Kailash, called Gang Rinpoche in Tibetan, is a peak in the Gangdise Mountains, which are part of the Himalayas in Tibet. It lies near the source of some of the longest rivers in Asia: the Indus, the Sutlej (a major tributary of the Indus), the Brahmaputra and the Karnali (a tributary of the Ganges). Near the foot of the mountain is Lake Manasarovar, its still waters inviting the mind to enter a yogic state of contemplation.

The *Vishnu Purana* describes Lord Siva seated in lotus pose, meditating inside the mountain, immersed in eternal bliss. It also says, perhaps metaphorically, that Kailash is the pillar of the world: from here, Siva sustains the Earth.

This summit and its surroundings are sacred ground for more than one religion. It is considered holy in Hinduism, Bön (the tribal faith that predates Tibetan Buddhism), Buddhism and Jainism. For Jains, Mount Kailash is the site where the first Jain tirthankara (liberated soul), Rishabhadeva, attained moksha. Tantric Buddhists believe that Mount Kailash is the home of the Buddha Demchok, who represents supreme bliss. And Milarepa, Tibet's 11th-century legendary yogi, bested the evil Naro Bön-chung in a magic duel by arriving at the top of the mountain riding the rays of the sun—so the story goes.

This pilgrimage, or *yatra*, is unusual because there is no temple, no shrine, no facilities. The only house of worship for Siva is the one He built Himself, the mountain. It is also unusual in that circumambulating the mountain (walking around it) is considered mandatory. This is usually an optional display of devotion in other places. A strenuous walk around Kailash is the very rite of worship. It is called *parikrama*, or *kora*.

The route starts at Tar Po Che, the "valley of Gods," and runs mostly along beautiful river valleys, except when crossing the Drolma La pass (at an altitude of 5600m) and the glacier nearby. The trail is done clockwise around the mountain by Hindus, Jains and Buddhists, but counter-clockwise by the Bön—who are arguably the most committed.

Almost every single Bön traverses the roughly 52 km of sand, rocks, boulders, rivulets and snow, not by walking but with continuous body-length prostrations.

Even in our contemporary times, numerous curious trekkers and unreligious mountaineers do the *kora* reverentially. No such adventurer has tried to climb the mountain, in due respect and reverence to the feelings of devotees. According to all religions that revere the mountain, setting foot on its slopes is a dire misdeed. Word is that many people who defied the taboo died in the process. Italian mountaineer Reinhold Messner was given permission by the Chinese government (which controls the area) to climb to the top in the 1980s, but he did not feel it was the right thing to do. "If we conquer this mountain, then we conquer something in people's souls..." he explained. The closest attempt was that of Spanish expedition in 2001, which initially received Chinese permission but saw it quickly revoked among loud international protests. It is now illegal even to try.

Every year thousands make a pilgrimage to Kailash. Some pilgrims believe the entire walk around Kailash should be made in a single day, which is not an easy task. A person in good shape, walking fast, would take perhaps 15 hours to complete the trek. Only the most devout accomplish this feat, little daunted by the uneven terrain, altitude sickness and harsh conditions. The many Bön and few brave Hindus who perform body-length prostrations follow a simple, strenuous ritual: the pilgrim bends down, kneels, prostrates full-length, makes a mark with his fingers, rises to his knees, prays, and then crawls forward on hands and knees to the mark made by his fingers before repeating

the process. Covering the distance by this discipline of endurance requires at least four weeks.

Mount Kailash is located in a particularly remote and inhospitable area of the Himalayas. Few modern amenities, such as benches, resting places and refreshment kiosks exist to aid pilgrims. Planning is more than essential: it can be a lifesaver.

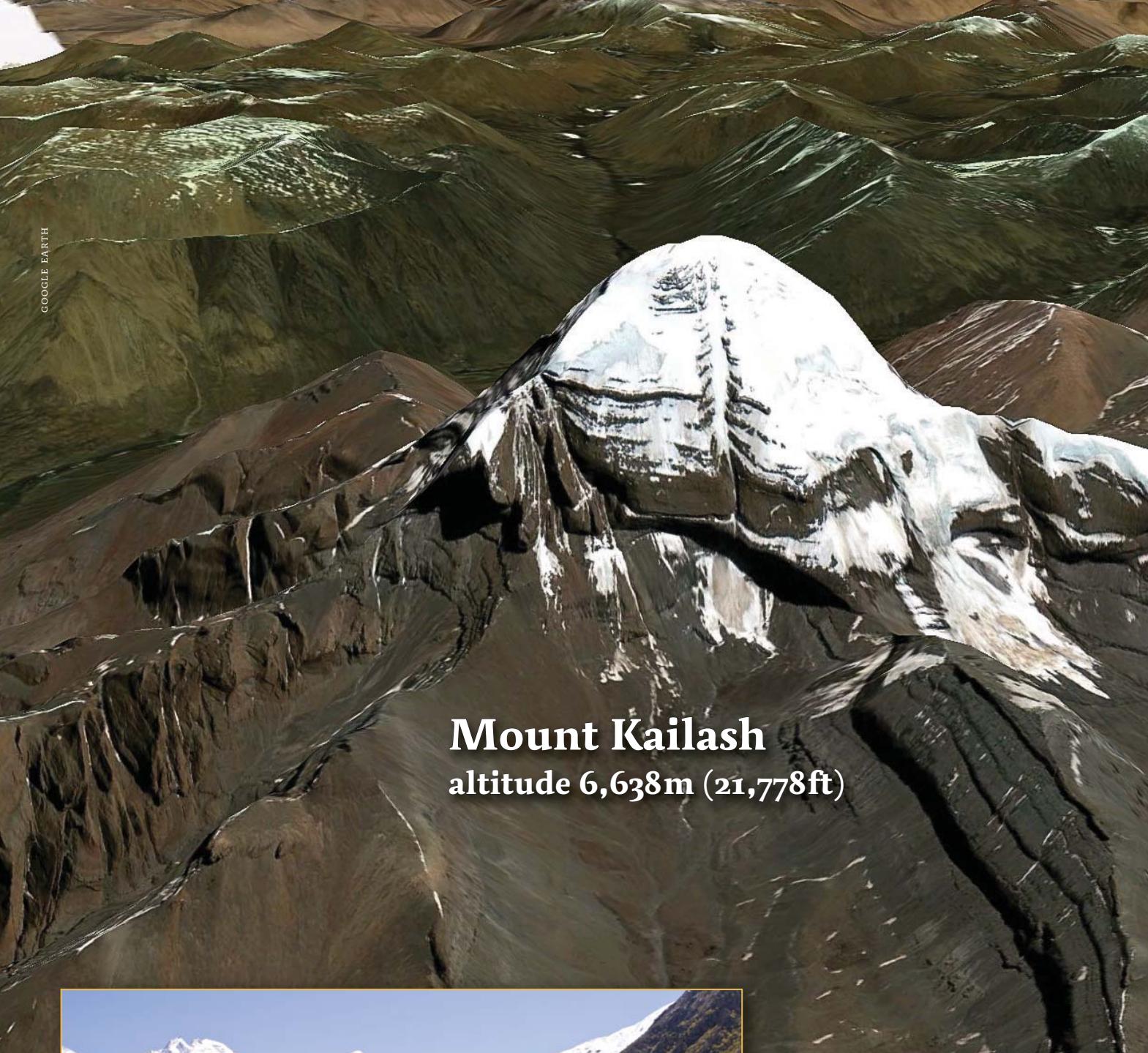
This report is my detailed journal of an extraordinary trip, intended to be of use to potential *yatris* (pilgrims). This "how-to" includes tips on selecting and negotiating with the travel agency, ideas about the journey, details of medical fitness (but talk to your doctor!) and more.

#### Why Do the Yatra?

Some have asked why I decided to perform this *yatra*. I was inspired by the image of Lord Siva as a great tapasavini, sitting and meditating in the Himalayas, blessing all, an austere Lord lost in oneness with His true Self, the Parabrahman. I asked myself, can we imbibe that degree of spiritual absorption when we sit for prayer and meditation, with our senses in cool control? Can we have that peaceful calmness in ourselves, too?

To me, Lord Siva as Pashupatinatha rules over animals, but also over our own instinctive demons. The reptilian part of the brain inside of our heads, as well as the limbic system, is animal in nature, fostering anger, jealousy, envy and attachments. With our sincere devotion to Lord Siva, we can overcome and keep in check these unconscious emotions. My quest was for Siva as Lord Dakshinamurti—calm, youthful, blissful and silent!

With such lofty aspirations and Siva enshrined in my heart, my journey began.



**Mount Kailash**  
altitude 6,638m (21,778ft)



(opposite page) The writer, Dr. T.S. Mohan, uses a walking stick to navigate through the snow during the freezing Himalayan summer as he performs the *parikrama*—the sacred circumambulation of Mount Kailash. (left) At lower altitudes, the natural beauty of the Himalayas is breathtaking. Several grand and sacred rivers form as rivulets; their waters run by majestic trees and small villages.

(top) A satellite photo of Mount Kailash and the mountains nearby.



A blueprint for any pilgrimage—including the Kailash Yatra

## Fifteen Spiritual Tips

- Make a firm samkalpa for the yatra. *Samkalpa*, a Sanskrit word, means a complete mental picture coupled with a firm intention to see it through.
- If you can find someone who has performed this pilgrimage, ask for all the details—the nitty gritty details. Read anything you can find on it.
- Ask yourself how this kind of yatra fits in with your spiritual goals and practices. You may remember that this is not just the fulfilling of a refined spiritual desire, but also a great opportunity to become closer to your Ishta Devata.
- Don't get sidetracked by the will of the group. Try to understand each religious practice, instead of blindly following the
- rituals others have done during the trip.
- Start planning months in advance.
- Design a 40-day sadhana period with the yatra as the culmination. For each day, practice early morning prayers and meditations; perform the yoga arts of pranayama, dharana and dhyana. Prepare body, mind and spirit for the trip.
- Analyze your pre-yatra eating habits in a thoughtful, but joyous way: if you begin to see the preparations and cleansing process as a burden, you may lose the enthusiasm that is so necessary to the trip. Wisdom should be the guide.
- Ask yourself how this kind of yatra fits in with your spiritual goals and practices. You may remember that this is not just the fulfilling of a refined spiritual desire, but also a great opportunity to become closer to your Ishta Devata.
- Don't get sidetracked by the will of the group. Try to understand each religious practice, instead of blindly following the
- chants, bhajans and satsangs. Attend pujas and abhishekams.
- Cut the gossip! Observe mauna (silence) and undertake periodic solitude.
- Eschew unnecessary and worldly reading, even news.
- Avoid non-spiritual company. Cultivate satsang, being in the presence (physical or virtual) of wise and truthful people.
- Fast mentally as well as spiritually: enjoy the purity that comes from abstaining from TV, parties and senseless internet drifting.
- Lead a conscious, goal-oriented daily life.
- Ask yourself during this process, has my bhakti for Lord Siva increased? Did I do my daily activities and work in the spirit of karma yoga? Was I compassionate toward others? Have I upheld dharma?
- Kindle the soul with evening

## Preparing for the Yatra

**T**HE KAILASH MANASAROVAR YATRA CAN be undertaken via two routes: the Kathmandu route and the Indian one via Kumaon in Uttarakhand Pradesh.

Pilgrims who have done both reported vastly greater satisfaction, more trekking and healthy acclimatization on the scenic and inspiring trails in Uttarakhand. The organization is better, and tour groups allow more time in Kailash and Manasarovar at a lesser cost. The caveat is the difficulty in getting approved. It is available only to Indian nationals. There are quotas of pilgrims every year, and there are too many competing for a chance. Only the robustly healthy and medically fit qualify through the rigorous Indian government selection. If you get approved, consider yourself lucky. Applications are invited during February or March of every year. The screening procedure will look daunting. Persist, and you may succeed.

I took the Kathmandu route. Either way, this yatra is a year-long affair, for one needs to be fully prepared even without the prod of the Indian permit. Timing is essential. Typically, the yatra is done such that one is at Lake Manasarovar on a *purnima* day (full moon). The most auspicious *purnima* is that in the month of Shravana (July–August), though heavy rains at that time often cause disruptions such as landslides, overflowing rivers and washed-out roads.

The concept is to visit Manasarovar either before or after doing the *parikrama*—the circumambulation of the mountain. Tour programs run from May through August every year. Early June is pretty cold; August is rainy,

although relatively warm during the day. The temperatures are just about right in late July and early August. Warm days of 30°C under the sun and 18°C in the shade are pleasant, and the nights are relatively better but still cold, down to 6°C.

The Indian crew starts from New Delhi. After a overnight bus ride, the trekking formally begins at Dharchula. The Indo-Tibetan Border Police checks the medical fitness once more near the border. Escorted by Chinese officials, one reaches Darchen.

As for the yatra via Kathmandu, I will tell you all about it!

### What to Expect

It was the month of Shravana in 2004 when I did my blessed pilgrimage. Taking a cue from an earlier yatri, I booked it through a travel agency in Kathmandu by phone and paid on arrival. They did what I discovered is a typical “big on talk, low on delivery” act—see the sidebar for some wisdom on getting around these perils.

At the local travel agencies I bought a package that included the service of staff to handle the cooking, the tents and even Chinese visas for the group. These agencies partner with the state-run Chinese agencies across the border, whose guides actually handle the entire tour and are ultimately responsible

for your yatra experience. They manage transportation, act as interpreters, choose appropriate wayside inns to overnight in case of inclement weather, handle the yaks and horses and even do the cooking. Yatris are pretty much in their hands.

Apart from the (bossy) guides and their broken English or unintelligible Hindi, other Tibetans will not be able to communicate with you.

If an incompetent crew is assigned to your group, no amount of complaining to your Nepali travel agency can help. Fortitude, resignation and a spirit of tapas and humility do help. Smile bravely, focus and get on with your pilgrimage goals. With tact, you can get the Chinese guides to listen and help.

The fee I paid for the yatra was about USD 1,200, from Kathmandu back to Kathmandu. Items included in the costs were: a bed-and-breakfast stay for two days before the start and one day after the return at a good Kathmandu hotel; transportation by bus, truck or land cruiser when needed; permits; the help of a Chinese guide; services of a sherpa cook-guide-worker; plus food for the entire journey in Tibet. travel within Tibet was done aboard Toyota Land Cruisers, four yatris to a vehicle. We stayed overnight in tents and, sometimes, in wayside inns. The journey was on foot only around Kailash itself.



(above) Cold days high up in the Himalayan chain are stunning, the intense blue of the sky contrasting the barren landscape. With a thin layer of atmosphere left above the pilgrim's heads, UV exposure is high and sunblock precautions are needed. The roads go on unchanged for miles; the yatra is not for the faint of heart or weak of body. (opposite page) A map of the path, or kora, around Mount Kailash.

## Six Down-to-Earth Tips

- Draw out a concrete itinerary, meticulously listing all details: transportation plans, hotels, where to eat, a list of medical establishments along the yatra. Plot all costs, timings and alternatives. Try to anticipate difficulties and create a few “plan B’s” for accidents, injuries, inclement weather and even getting robbed. Instead of being anxious, be prepared.
- Work hard on the luggage list. When badly done, a lot of unnecessary stuff is carried around and the most useful items are left out. I have laid out a sample packing list in my yatra website: [www.vedanta-family.org/kailas/](http://www.vedanta-family.org/kailas/)
- The more you are dependent on others or on material resources for your sadhana, the more the inconveniences. When circumstances are outside of your control, do mental tapas inside and observe peace outside.
- Finally, a pilgrimage destination does not have to be a far and inaccessible place. It could be the nearest hill town with a shrine to a Deva or Devata. The most important aspect of the yatra is your relationship to the Divine, both inside and outside of yourself.
- After completing your pilgrimage, set aside time to meditate on and document the lessons learned, the experiences and the blessings. Few people do

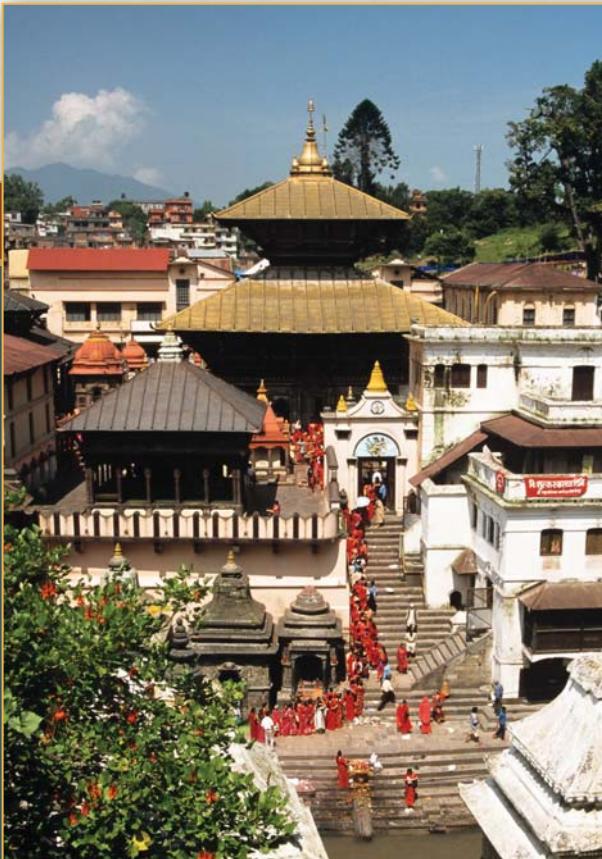


## Kathmandu

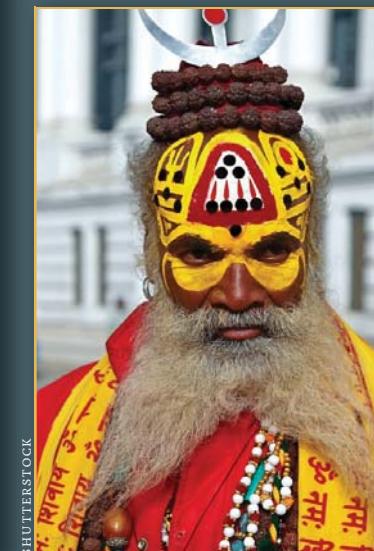
THE YATRA STARTED TO SEEM REAL ONCE I reached Kathmandu, ready to start. Kathmandu is a bustling, overcrowded city of peace-loving Nepalis. Most roads are narrow, dotted with ancient temples. Thamel is the central tourist district, with souvenir shops, trekking gear outlets, lodges and eating joints. You will also find several tourist agencies offering competitive tours to Mount Kailash here. These agencies are usually aggregators, who channel traffic to a few who organize the programs.

While in Kathmandu, apart from visiting the famous Pashupatinath Temple, one should plan to visit Hanuman Dhoka at the old Royal Palace; the Kumari Temple where the Virgin Goddess resides embodied as a prepubescent girl; Taleju Temple, an architectural achievement; Bhimsen Temple, Viswanath Temple and Krishna Temple. Plan the journey with a few buffer days at Kathmandu before and after the parikrama. There is much to see.

Also interesting is the tourist district, where you can buy precious stones, gems, antiques and artware. Remember to bargain and visit several shops. Rudraksha malas are excellent in Kathmandu, but be careful to buy authentic ones (way below the first price sellers ask for!).



Kathmandu is awash in color, which pilgrims



SHUTTERSTOCK



SHUTTERSTOCK

I climbed to a hill temple and, while chasing away some monkeys who were harassing a young mother and her small child on her hip, I felt giddy. Sitting down on the steps, my head down between my knees, I lost consciousness and toppled forward. Pilgrims rescued me. I came back into awareness with some blood on my face and a hurt nose, having learned the lesson that the high altitude is a humbling challenge. It was a useful warning for the journey ahead.

### Vegetarian food

Most Nepalis, if not all, eat non-vegetarian food. Veggie fare is hard to come by. There are simple vegetarian joints in Thamel near the Thamel Chowk, such as the Shree Lal Vegetarian Restaurant. Saktar, a punjabi vegetarian place, offers an excellent dhal roti. Hotel Gangjong is also one of the few vegetarian havens.

### Visiting Pashupatinath Temple

I went to Lord Siva's ancient Pashupatinath Temple to offer my devotion as a last preparation step before my yatra. The 7th-century complex is the heart of local Hinduism and a pride of Nepal.

The many monkeys within the temple complex can be brutes. They will grab bags from people's shoulders and turn them upside down looking for food. But shoo them and you will get the fright of your life when they put up a fight, holding you by your clothes and snarling. Ladies who scowl at them sometimes have their saris pulled! The best strategy is to give them a

fruit; they will run away to eat it somewhere quiet.

At its main shrine, South Indian purohits (priests) handle the day-long continuous chants and pujas in a way familiar to me. The other shrines reflect the local heritage and a tantric background, with wildly different rituals.

The temple complex is located on the banks of the river Bhagmati, where people bathe barely upstream from a crematory ghat. Lining up along the temple and the river are several rooms filled with old people awaiting their last breath: people come here to die at an auspicious place.

In a poignant experience, I observed that on the balcony with a view of the temple were devotees lost in devotion; but from on the rooms underneath came ghastly wails and sorrowful cries, from those in the last lap of their lives and their mourning families. Soon, emerging from seemingly nowhere, a cortège arrived at the steps to the sacred river, carrying a body draped in white. They laid it on a stone slab which touched the waters on one side and a large Sivalingam on the other.

A female Nepali priest directed the rituals, even as, on the opposite river bank, tourists excitedly ran for prime spots with their camcorders and cameras, pointing big zoom lenses, devoid of any respect. All the while, the river flowed by nonchalantly.

This event immersed my mind in thoughts of Lord Siva. The Sri Rudram hymn says, "O Siva, you are Lord of the auspicious and the souls; you are the Lord of the inauspicious and death; you are the Lord of this profound play; you are the silent witness of the contradictions of reality, and you are Reality itself!"



## The Yatra Begins

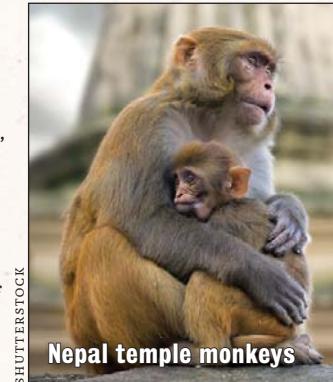
Monday 26th July 2004 From Kathmandu to Kodari to Zhang-mu

DAY 1 My tourist agency delayed the start of our itinerary by three days, spinning tales of border confusion and Westerners breaching security rules in Tibet. Meanwhile, we were acclimatizing for the altitude. Drinking

a lot of water is important, and since water in Kathmandu is rather unsafe, we lived off two or three liters of mineral water a day! After a persistent push, our group of five (two Hindus plus three Westerners with a deep interest in Buddhism), along with three sherpas (one guide, one cook and one helper), sailed off in a small bus on the 26th July early morning, headed to the border village of Kodari.

We knew there would be no bath during the yatra, except for the dips in Lake Manasarovar. I took an extra long shower and put on the outfit that would last the whole trip. (You change only your inner garments and use an extra dose of cologne if you start smelling.)

After a stunning five-hour scenic drive through valleys, mountains and river gorges, we reached Kodari, where the small river Bhode Kosi flows rapidly, tumbling down the



SHUTTERSTOCK

Nepal temple monkeys

mountains. While our agents handled immigration formalities, we relaxed in a wayside restaurant, eating lunch and getting pestered by eager Chinese banking "entrepreneurs" who offer a not-so-friendly exchange rate from rupees to the riminbi. From there we walked across Friendship Bridge into Tibet, jumping on Land Cruisers headed to the town of Zhang-mu higher up in the mountains. The roads are dirt-tracks, rough, narrow and hugging the mountainsides, slippery with waterfalls and stream crossings, going in hairpin loops to higher altitudes. A complacent slip of the steering wheel could send the vehicle tumbling down the steep mountainside into the gorge. You could meet Siva a little earlier than planned!

The beauty of the Himalayas is astounding, especially in July, when the rains are generous and a thousand waterfalls blossom along the lush green mountainsides, while occasional clouds float by and around you.

The small hamlet of Zhang-mu has colorfully bright buildings. We stayed at an inn overnight. The room was simple, overlooking the valley where one could see the distant Kodari down below. I had the temerity to drive out a wasp from the room, where it was nesting. It was an Asian giant hornet, its wing span 3 inches! I was given a grand sting,



Asian giant hornet

with a pain that lasted for several days. Pilgrims involve austerities of all kinds.

Tuesday 27th July 2004 From Zhang-mu to Nyalam-mu

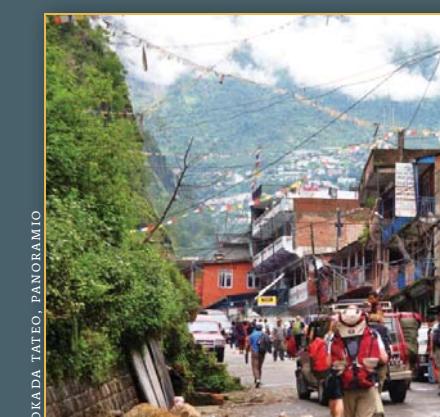
DAY 2 The next day, after a lot of dilly-dallying from our guides, we left after lunch for the village of Nyalam-mu—literally "gateway to hell" in Tibetan—up in the Tibetan plateau. It was cold. We were shivering, in spite of multiple layers of woolen clothing. After a long delay at a police check post, we reached Nyalam-mu.

Sor far, everyone was mostly silent, each one absorbed in his or her thoughts. This would be true for all of the yatra.

I ventured to take a stroll uphill, but because of the altitude, I felt like an ill man who had left his hospital bed for the first time in a long while.

Going from Kodari (2,700 m) to Zhang-mu (3,200 m) to Nyalam-mu (4,200 m) was quite an altitude transition. The green forests and waterfalls were behind, giving way to grassy mountains and eventually to noth-

soon leave behind for the yatra's icy, rocky paths



OKADA TATEO, PANORAMIO

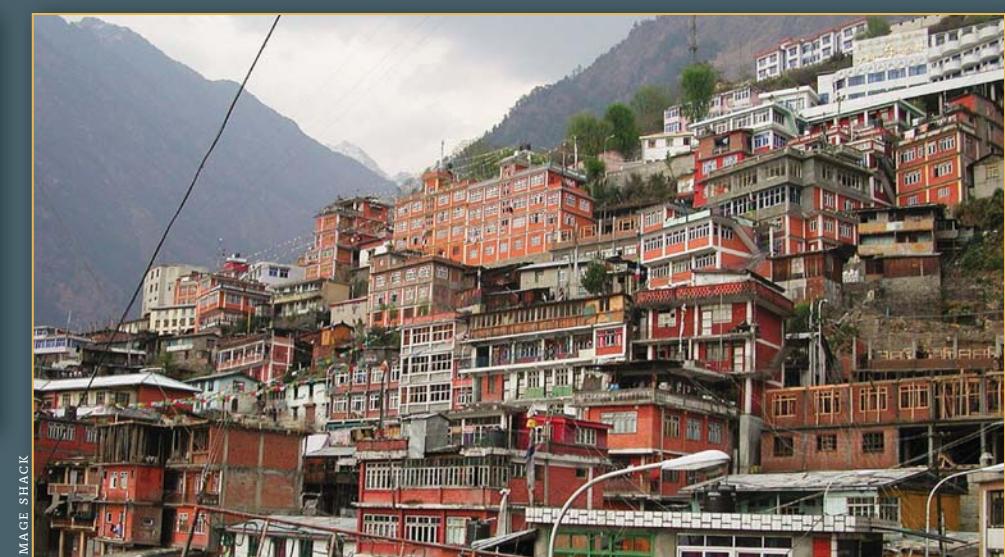


IMAGE SHACK

(left to right) Pashupatinath Temple; a colorful sadhu; the Deity Bhairava, a form of Siva; the village of Kodari; dwellings in the town of Zhang-mu



ing but the arid, mountainous plateau of Nyalam-mu.

The key to an enjoyable Kailash yatra is to become acclimatized to the increased elevations and avoid altitude sickness. Doing so makes an enormous difference. I suggest reading mountaineering guides about how to best prepare. Otherwise, the only medical option is to immediately go down in altitude, back to Zhang-mu, and quit the pilgrimage altogether. A tough call.

**Wednesday 28th July 2004**  
From Nyalam-mu to Saga

**DAY 3** After a semi-civilized tug-of-war with the Chinese guides, we got to choose the place of stay for the night in the village of Nyalam-mu: a decent hotel with toilets. The effects of high altitude were evident on everyone. Strain a bit, and you immediately become breathless. Our journey kept taking us up and up; we were supposed to stay at Nyalam-mu to acclimatize for 24 hours, but hardly 12 hours had gone by when we headed into our vehicles at 4am in the morning. Our destination was the town of Saga, on the Tibetan plateau.

There is a competition among the tourist operators, who start the day this early so they can be sure to make it to the ferry that crosses the River Brahmaputra, which can only take four vehicles at a time. In the daybreak hours, our headlights light up the barren mountainside, our road leading to the highest pass (5,120 m or 16,787 ft) in the vicinity of the Sisha-pang-ma mountain range.



It was very foggy.

As the day dawned, the views were fantastic. Rolling mountains and wide, flat valleys with no trees or human habitations anywhere! Occasionally nomadic families could be seen camping around; and a few yak herds livened up the terrain. The drive was strenuous: bumpy and dusty. Despite the tireless sales pitch of the Nepali agency, promising "the best of comforts and reliability!" for their vehicles, we had several vehicle breakdowns.

Somehow our Chinese guides would fix the problem and move on—this happened every day of our journey, in the middle of nowhere. It felt like we were a moving machine shop. The incredible drivers know how to rip apart and put together their land cruisers and the truck. Just don't look too closely at the contraptions fashioned to hold these things together!

I came to realize that bigger groups have better food, the cooking being better organized. Small groups may fare badly. We had *something* packed in plastic bags and given to us in the early morning, nothing I care to remember. We drank a lot of min-

eral water. I carried 25 one-liter bottles for the trip, and they did not last long. With the high-altitude sickness medications we were taking, daily water consumption averages four liters per person.

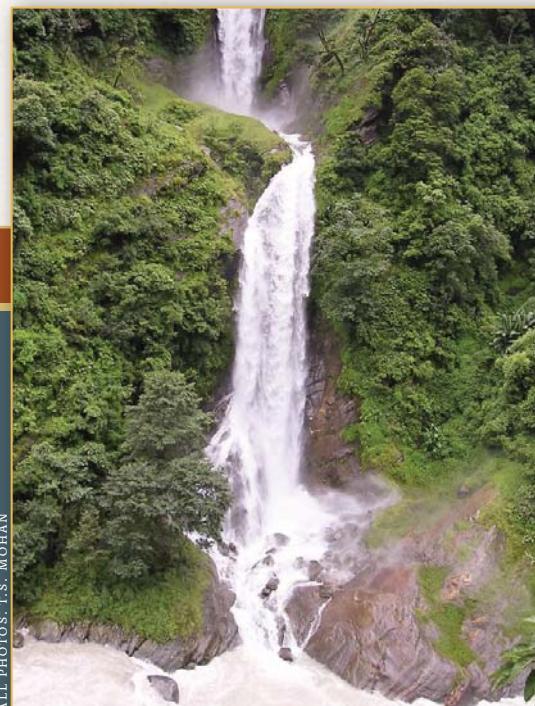
We traveled more than 200 km following faint vehicle tracks on a shortcut, for there is no direct road between Nyalam-mu and Saga. We reached the ferry point around 4pm, and after an hour we crossed the river using an interesting device. Barges were guided by a thick wire tied across the river. The river current makes the barge move quietly, its angle controlled by the pilot.

Finally we arrived in Saga. But there were no amenities waiting for us; we quickly left it behind. Crossing the hamlet, we reached a field and pitched our tent alongside a stream!

The first night in the tent! I was thrilled. One tent for each person, plus kitchen and dining tents. It rained on us, too, adding to the atmosphere. Dinner was a simulation of European fare. For a toilet, a makeshift structure was put up at some distance.

Breathlessness was common, even for small tasks. Running or climbing a hill quickly produced the inevitable reaction: dizziness and a slide down to one's knees.

The night was interrupted by the visits of grazing



ALL PHOTOS: T.S. MOHAN

(top) Camping at the top of the world is unforgettable: the peace, the silence, the yaks. (Far left) Abundant waters from melting glaciers create a spectacle of life at lower altitudes, where the yatra is simply a bumpy car ride. (left) Closer to Mount Kailash, the atmosphere seems more suitable to tapas, meditation and austerities.



yaks and the yak-herd dogs sniffing around, often a few inches away from the tent. Dog howls and dog fights punctured the calm of a windy Himalayan night. Sleeping was not an easy task.

**Thursday, 29th July 2004**  
From Saga to Paryang

**DAY 4** After a quick breakfast, we were off to the next stop, 250 km away: Paryang, a quaint little village. Along the way were a few rustic homes, crowded with little children who were clear about what they wanted: pens, plastic bindis and chocolates. But just about anything is happily received.

The landscape became an endless variation on the same theme, broken perhaps by different Himalayan peaks and the occasional huge lake, drawing pilgrims into a meditative state. Any unexpected stream was negotiated by trying to find a proper ford. Road breaches were common.

We camped outside Paryang for the night, near a small lake. The vast, rolling stretches of plateau, the distant mountains and the gathering dark rain clouds made our evening interesting. We were under a heavy storm, with lightning, thunder and hail, for about an hour. A big question was, "What if the lightning strikes our metallic tent poles?" We were within a few inches of the pole most of the time.

**Friday 30th July 2004**  
From Paryang to Lake Manasarovar

**DAY 5** Next morning we left for Lake Manasarovar. After a grueling seven-hour journey and another 250 km or so, we reached the prayer spot that marks the first sightings of the Holy Lake and the Holy Mountain on the route. The tall prayer flagstaff, along with Buddhist prayer flags, adds to the spiritual ambience. The vehicles circle it and later the Tibetan drivers prostrate full length on the ground. A beautiful place, a wonderful sight.

Half an hour later, we started a partial circumambulation of the lake towards our

## Guidelines To Keep You Sane and Alive

**P**ICKING THE RIGHT AGENCY IS CRUCIAL: your experience on the yatra depends on who is running the show. Talk to several tour operators. Remember, most sales folks have absolutely no idea of what the yatra is like and will promise the moon at times. Here are hard-earned tips.

- Our travel agency's managing director deliberately put a wrong mobile number in his business card, so that we would never call and complain! When cornered, he sheepishly corrected it.
- Book your air tickets early. I had to postpone my trip because getting confirmed reservations was difficult. Some airlines are unreliable; check their history of flight arrivals.
- Try to gather like-minded spiritual people to go with you, in multiples of four for the vehicles.
- Do not buy yatra accessories from the tourist agencies: you can get them cheaper elsewhere.
- State your option for a vegetarian cuisine and ask that it be cooked and served appropriately. Many times, the cook and the helper sherpas cut short their cooking chores by frying all food in the same pan with the same oil. Politely convey your requirements to the cook and others during the yatra to ensure that it happens.
- Bargain on the price up front. Year 2004 prices were around 53,000 rupees, all inclusive except the stay in Kathmandu (add another 50% for other expenses). Ensure that the standards of the trip are agreed upon in writing. Do not pay any money before reaching Kathmandu, only after visiting the travel agent's office. Ask for receipts: "What receipt?" they will say. Insist.
- The guides shall have the resources to solve problems that arise, and respond to the communications with the yatrasis. In our case, after spending money on truck repairs, they tried to stay on budget by saving on the food they were expected to feed us.
- The Chinese drivers should: A) stop the vehicle upon request (we were all drinking lots of water); B) be courteous in their interactions with the yatrasis; C) respect the group's religious sentiments; D) not smoke inside the vehicles; E) not play their pop music loud.
- Mineral water will be packed and served as part of the general package and not be charged for separately.
- The guides must take the yatrasis to Chugnu Gompa, Chiu Gompa and its hot springs,

### REQUIRE YOUR TRAVEL AGENCY TO COMMIT TO THE FOLLOWING

- 1. Rakshas Tal, Darchen Gompa, Ashtapad, Tar-po-che, Dheer Puk Gompa, Gauri kund, Zutul Puk Gompa and Thirthapuri hot springs—plus Lake Manasarovar. Many of these destinations are skipped if you are not attentive.
- 2. The price for yak and horse rides during the parikrama will be capped up front. Many times, after reaching the mountains, pilgrims get a shock with the price tags, leading to unpleasant arguments.
- 3. Luggage will be kept always clean and dry in the trucks. It often gets dirty and drenched, being exposed to rain and fuel.
- 4. On the parikrama around Mt. Kailash, the sherpas shall bring the toilet tents and mineral water bottles on the yak. If you don't ask for this, they will bring only minimal equipment.
- 5. Any monetary tips that you will give to the sherpas or the drivers will be based on your satisfaction: there shall be no mandatory tipping! This helps ensure their good behavior and performance.
- 6. Ask the agency what procedure would be adopted if, during the yatra, one is: a) ill with food poisoning b) ill with high altitude sickness c) down with broken limbs d) down due to flu, fever or cough.
- 7. Every member of the group shall have a separate, rainproof tent in good condition. (Mine leaked.) You live in your private world within it, resting and meditating! In other groups, ladies and gents were packed eight members to a small tent!
- 8. Every day's menu will be shared upfront the previous day! Oil used once for frying will not be used again. Non-veg cooking will be separately handled with no interchange of used oils, pans or spoons.



night halt near the Chiu Gompa. Its glistening aquamarine-green waters, framed by distant peaks and dark clouds, added to the mystery of this most sacred place. I could not stop marveling at the fact that this was sacred Manasarovar in the Himalayas. It was wonderful.

Many green shrubs and small flowering plants bloomed on the banks. There was hardly any habitation or wildlife, and definitely there were no boats! The lake has a perimeter of about 140 km, growing and shrinking with the seasons. A typical parikrama around the lake takes three days on horseback, or a few hours by vehicle.

After a few hours' drive, we drove westward to Manasarovar's sibling, Lake Rakshastal. When Lake Manasarovar becomes full, it overflows into Rakshastal via a rivulet. Here another beautiful sight greeted us—the sun setting over the water and the distant mountains. According to Hindu lore, it was on the banks of Rakshastal that the demon-king Ravana worshiped Lord Siva, who resided on nearby Mount Kailash.

We drove for more than an hour in the dark along Rakshastal before heading back towards Lake Manasarovar. After an hour, we reached the campsite, where a warm meal awaited us. Then the full moon, holy Shravana purnima, rose in the sky! The moon was bright and lustrous over the lake.

That was a special time and place for deep meditation, bhajans and chants. After a dinner loaded with garlic to aid us in the upcoming trek, we dispersed, each to his own world. There was the moon, the most sacred lake, and the unseen but nearby Mount Kailash. I was surrounded by quiet and solitude. My mind suggested, "Meditate... Meditate... Meditate!" And I did. Despite the garlic.

**Saturday 31st July 2004**  
**From Chiu Gompa to Darchen**

**DAY 6** After daybreak, some of us approached Manasarovar to quietly pray and meditate. It was cold. My frantic shivering did not add to the spiritual ambience. Nevertheless, the prayers and chants continued for more than three hours. We chanted Sri Rudram, Chamakam, Lalitha Sahasranamam, Devi Sthuthi, Durga Suktam, Siva Sthuthi and other mantras.

This was the day for a snanam (bathing) in the Lake. The shivering devotees took their dip quickly. Three dips with namaskarams to the distant Mount Kailash seemed enough, along with *arygam* (saluting ablutions) to all the Gods and forefathers, as well as prayers for all our people.

Later we briefly joined another group performing a Gayatri homa nearby. The sun was blazing hot, but glacial winds were blow-

ing! The lake glistened at the noon while we, enraptured, listened to the deep chant of a Buddhist Lama's assistant; it was wonderful. Again I heard inner orders: Meditate... Meditate... Meditate!

After lunch we packed up and left for the village of Darchen near the base of Mount Kailash, over the Parkha Plains. It is wonderful to see Kailash's southern face. Mount Nandadevi and other peaks in India were visible, too. Everyone was excited.

Once dinner was over and the horses and yaks cared for, everyone retired.

The night was so cold.

**Sunday, 1st August 2004, From Darchen to Tar Po Che to Dheerpuk**

**DAY 7** Day one of the parikrama had arrived: we were ready to walk around the mountain.

We packed light for the three-day trek. Most of our personal luggage was left behind in the truck; the basics were brought on the yaks. After breakfast we were taken in the vehicle to the general Buddhist starting point, called Tar Po Che, Valley of the Gods, about 6km away. It had a tall flagpost with many Buddhist prayer flags—the main prayer, Om Mani Padme Hum—tied around it in several directions. With salutations to Lord Siva, Ganesha and guru, we started the parikrama! We were each one on our own, within shouting distance of one another.

We hiked along the banks of the river Lha Chu in the valley between two close mountain ranges. Wonderful scenes, both sublime and spiritual.

I passed several devotees from other groups and wished each one of them a warm "Aum Namah Sivaya." They hailed from Chennai, or Mumbai, or Gujarat, or Delhi or the nearest Chinmaya Mission. Many were Tibetans. Coming in the opposite direction were the Bön devotees who counter-circumambulate the Holy Kailash, doing full body prostrations for more than 50 km. What stamina! What faith! I saluted with a namaskar everyone I come across. With every step, the mind is immersed in Lord Siva and His beautiful creations around, resounding to the continuous inner chant of Aum Namah Sivaya and other mantras.

After several hours of trekking, and with several mildly breathless hikes up the increasing slopes, we reached Dheerpuk (altitude 4800m), a lofty place from where Mount Kailash blesses you with a wonderful view of its north-northwestern face. In fact, this spot on the parikrama trail is the closest and offers the best view of the holy Mountain. Beyond this point, for the next two days, we were not be able to get a glimpse of it again.

Camp was set up beyond the Dheerpuk monastery, near a primitive bridge over the river. After separate dinner within our tents, I fell asleep, exhausted, my thoughts immersed in Lord Siva.

**Monday 2nd August 2004, From Dheerpuk to Drolma La to Zutul Puk**

**DAY 8** Again we woke up to a breakfast heavy in garlic; we would need the extra fire in our bellies. That was the most challenging day of the parikrama. We had to climb up more than 800m and cross the Drolma La pass (altitude 5600m).

Each step of the climb left me breathless. I had to stop frequently to calm down my palpitating heart. "Om Namah Sivaya," I thought, and that kept me going.

The not-so-steep climb goes through pathways amongst huge boulders and rocks. Several yaks and horses with their passenger-riders passed me. Some presented a funny sight. Desperately clinging to the animal, not having had any training whatsoever in riding, many yatris make a heroic effort to stay balanced on these wayward animals. Horses walking on rocks are jittery; and yaks do not follow any set path, straying frequently to eat grass or brush against each other. They will get into streams in wrong places with devotees precariously perched on their backs. "Well," I thought, "thank God I have the stamina to walk!"

Plastic bottles and wrappings, aluminum Red Bull cans, chocolate wrappings and medication containers littered the ground even in these remote and sacred areas. There are also broken beer bottles—Lhasa Tibetan beer! The Bon also have a tradition of leaving some of their belongings behind as a symbolic spiritual gesture, which works when they leave clothes or wood, but they have not updated their thinking to modern times and often leave non-degradable materials that will last for ages. I insisted that our sherpas burn part of our trash, and we brought back the rest.

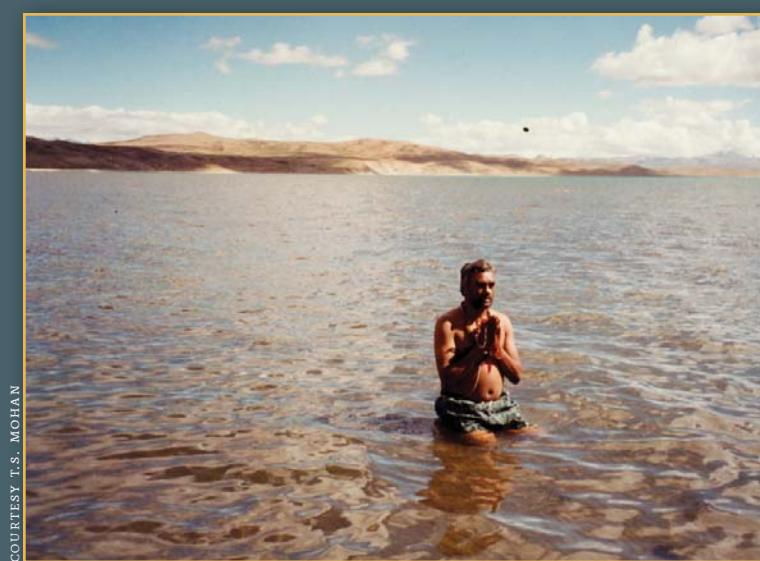
At Drolma-La there is a huge offering of prayer flags tied everywhere. I had bought one in Kathmandu. After offering my prayer to Devi Tara, or Goddess Drolma, I tied the flags, strung on a long cord about 20 feet in length. Some yatris offered incense and *ahir* (rice grains). I gathered my belongings and spent some time with the other devotees of Lord Siva. Amongst them was Revered Swami Ishwaranandaji from the Chinmaya Mission, Mumbai.

The place invited contemplation. Meditate, meditate, meditate!

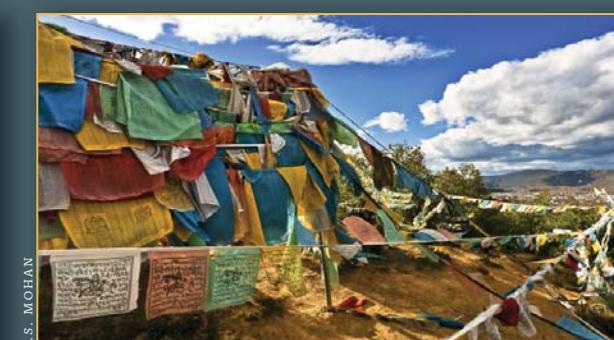
A few meters down the path we saw Lake Gouri Kund below, its water greenish blue, almost the color of the sky.



Far from humanity's conundrums: peace and quiet at the top of the world



COURTESY T.S. MOHAN



T.S. MOHAN

(above) Prayer flags, sometimes by the thousands, mark the important spots of the pilgrimage. (top) Yaks are the most reliable method of transportation in the Himalayas, which is not saying much. (left) The author does a snanam, worshipful bathing, in Lake Manasarovar.



On the pass, all pilgrims riding yaks and horses must dismount for safety reasons. Of course, no one had warned the yatris, and the elderly and weak complained. We descended the valley slope by foot.

We crossed a mini glacier, a mass of snow that had hardened into ice. Huge boulders surrounded us, cut out of the rock by the movement of ice and water. Further down, seeing the first signs of habitation, we were relieved to be back to some form of civilization, where tame animals grazed.

Quite thirsty and with no water, I drank from a river, accepting the risk of stomach infections. Though the waters are free of chemicals, they are polluted by the animals and the bacterial moss growth along the way. I survived, though. After a long trek, we reached our campsite. It was achingly beautiful, but we just went to sleep, exhausted.

**Tuesday 3rd August 2004**  
**From Zutul Puk to Hor-Chu**

**DAY 9** Day three of parikrama. The morning was bright, the Sun just behind the peaks. On the way we visited Zutul Puk monastery, the site of a cave where the famous Buddhist monk Milarepa meditated. Yak-ghee lamps burned before the various Buddhist Deities and Sakyamuni Buddha.

We started trekking. A friendly and faithful yak-herding dog led my way from the monastery. A giant Tibetan marmot, three feet long, added life to the otherwise desolate landscape. After walking for several hours along the gorges cut by the Lham Chu river,



**Repairing a road**

we reached the parikrama completion point, marked by a prayer flag. Our vehicles were waiting. I had to say goodbye to the dog.

We drove to Manasarovar. The lake was inviting, with the sun shining bright above and winds that were not too cold. We took long and pious dips, offering our devotion! Mount Kailash was always visible in the distance, giving a darshan that shall remain etched in our minds for ages.

The lake bed near the shore was shallow, a few feet deep only, so the water was warm enough for us to remain in it for more than 30 minutes.

Using a small setup, we performed abhishekam and then puja, chanting Sri Rudram and other mantras for more than three hours until the Sun started setting. Cold winds made us shiver. What a great occasion! I sat in silence and meditated over the setting Himalayan sun.

At the village of Horchu that night, we had a quasi-pizza made with yak cheese. The

night was relaxed and meditative, punctuated by the distant barks of shepherd dogs and the far sound of merry sherpas celebrating their arrival with loud music, drums and booze.

**Wednesday 4th August 2004**  
**From Hor-Chu to Paryang**

**DAY 10** We woke up feeling lazy, but it was time to hustle. Camps packed, we set our sights on Paryang. The land cruisers had their quota of problems, and so did the trucks. There was notice

of rains along the way, with possible road breaches and river overflows. Absorbed in the experiences of the parikrama, we rode silently back to Paryang. It rained and rained. The after-effects of the spiritual experiences were visible in each of us, manifesting an enjoyable silence and inner solitude.

**Thursday, 5th August 2004**  
**From Paryang to Saga**

**DAY 11** We hit the road again but did not get far. Several rivulets had breached the road, and tour guides and yatris had to fill up the breaches manually with rocks.

We reached the town of Saga in the evening, but the heavy rains had spoilt all camping places; they were soggy and freezing. So we decided to stay at an inn. These inns are typically a row of mud-built rooms, brightly painted, with an uneven mud floor. Often rooms are used as kitchens.

The bedding included a mattress and a

quilt. A single light bulb and a big hot water flask were my luxuries.

There was a communal toilet at one corner of the compound. Toilets in these Tibetan inns are odd structures, elevated, parapet-walled open potholes with a big under-cavern that accumulates human wastes in unpleasant perpetuity. Camp life was better. Dinner was not until almost midnight; then we all retired for a well-earned sleep.

**Friday 6th August 2004**  
**From Saga to Nyalam-mu**

**DAY 12** Sleep proved to be difficult and light. Then came the shocker: we were awakened at 3am. There would be a huge rush of vehicles needing to cross the River Brahmaputra—so we were asked to

get ready to claim our queue slot in the front so we could cross early and proceed with the day's drive to Nyalam-mu. Otherwise, we were told, our team would spend the day at the shore, waiting for our turn. Painfully but with discipline, we got ready. But the drivers were nowhere to be seen. We waited and waited. It turned out they were too tired and continued to sleep until 9 am. Adding to our misery, before we could finally leave, they had to repair a vehicle that broke its suspension. O God, bless us. The group walked away and spent the time chanting mantras.

It was noon by the time we reached the river crossing station. Ahead of us were 50 land cruisers and a few trucks. Again we waited patiently. It was 5:30pm when we finally crossed the river and resumed our



**The yatris**

journey. But, alas, nobody had anticipated the serious austerity of a night drive over unmarked terrain, with no plans to pitch a camp. On top of everything, the trucks failed, as expected. Again we stood by. As night fell, the Sisha-pang-ma peaks glowed eerily. We sailed out once more. Our driver put on some loud Hindi and English pop music and drove like crazy. Time passed by. Stars shone thickly in the clean and clear sky. Midnight arrived.

Into the darkest night, with just tire marks as a faint road, our headlights peering no more than a few meters ahead along curvy paths, driving at high speeds, the driver seemed possessed. He had to reach Nyalam-mu at dawn—maybe his job depended on that. No dinner. We were exhausted, but none dared to sleep. "Aum Namah Sivaya... Aum Namah Sivaya... Aum Namah Sivaya..." I chanted and chanted in my mind, to keep the noise of the pop Western music at bay.

## Dos and Don'ts of the Kailash Yatra

- Don't get your shoes wet, ever! Walk carefully, especially across rivers and rivulets. Use a walking stick or a hiking pole. Use waterproof trekking shoes meant for cold countries. If your shoes get wet, dry them out as early as possible! A soggy boot can injure your feet in no time.
- Carry with you an ample supply of water and energy-giving food (not junk snacks). In an emergency, you might have to live on those rations, stranded for long hours before someone discovers you. Each day, take a food box with items from breakfast.
- While shopping anywhere, bargain using sign language. Start at 60 percent of the asking price. Forty percent may work, too.
- Bring a couple of small padlocks so you can lock your tent zipper.
- At many of the stops, you will encounter small children asking for gifts, or poor people begging. Carry
- small items with you to give away.
- You can mix lukewarm water with the cold water before drinking. This helps with coughs and cold-sensitive teeth.
- Pack a pair of sandals, in addition to your shoes. Wear them at the camp to give your feet and your shoes time to breathe.
- Ladies should bring a makeshift mini-tent to answer nature's call when the cars stop. There is little place to hide, really.
- Pack all your clothes and belongings in plastic bags. That will help prevent dampness and possible drenching. In addition, it separates the used from the unused. No laundry service available!
- Bring your own sleeping bag if possible, one that can sustain you in -5°C.
- When sleeping in a tent, do not cover your face. Use lip balm and wear gloves. Never allow your feet to be without

- socks (keep a separate pair of woolen/nylon socks for sleeping only).
- Nurse any foot problems every night; they get worse fast, and cold, plus injury can result in gangrene.
- Never use candles or matches inside a tent.
- Carry a small, deodorant-size oxygen cylinder with you always.
- During the journey, report any sickness of any kind to the sherpa and Chinese guides.
- Never skip a meal and never stop drinking water, for you could weaken and dehydrate in no time. Never over-exert yourself. Breathlessness can make you dizzy, and you could trip on rocks and fall.
- Do the parikrama at a steady pace.
- The water in big flasks in the rooms of the inns are typically for washing your face, not for drinking. This is the only bathing that you will have on the road.

- Carry your own garbage bag. Bring all bottles and cans back to the cities.
- Use lip balm or vaseline for your lips and sunscreen lotion on your face and hands. The rarefied atmosphere makes for high UV exposure.
- While walking on ice use your pole to check its thickness. Beware!
- You cannot recharge batteries anywhere except Kathmandu. Take several spare charged batteries. Watch out for dust damage to your cameras.
- Never part with your passport and other vital documents except when at customs. Ask to have them back as soon as the guides are done with the paperwork.
- Practice silence. The yatra is not about the company. Soak in the grandeur of the Kailash region, the plateaus, valleys, mountains and lakes!



ALL PHOTOS COURTESY T.S. MOHAN

Saturday, 7th August 2004, From Nyalam-mu to Zhang-mu to Kodari to Kathmandu

DAY  
13

Stressed by our frantic blind ride, we reached Nyalam-mu at 2am. Later in the morning, we reconnected with other members of our convoy, for not all vehicles had arrived together.

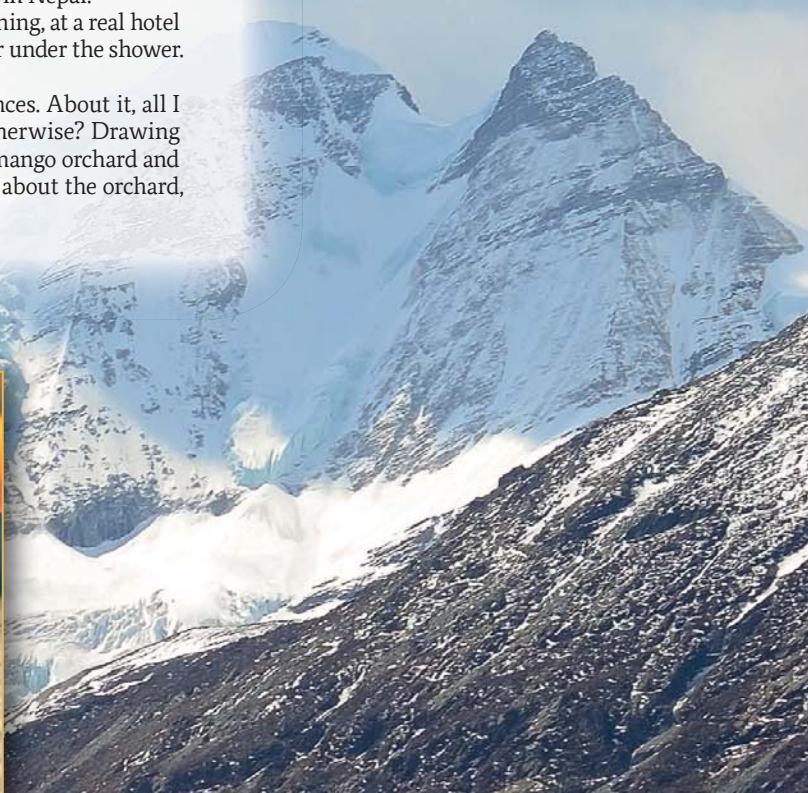
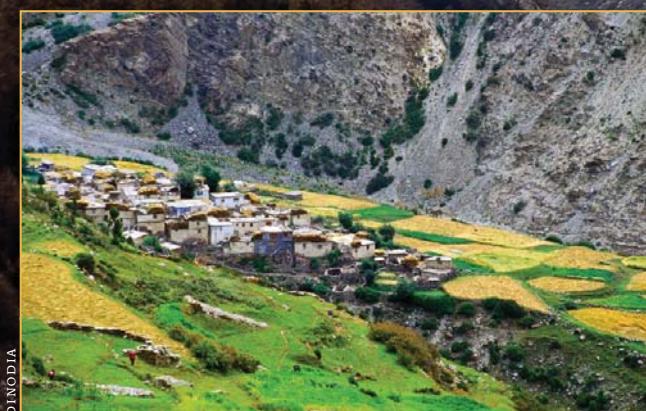
By noon we were back on the road, for we had to reach Kathmandu that night. Missing the flight out of Nepal the next day was just not acceptable for some of us—Indian Airlines flies to Kolkata three times a week. Miss the Sunday flight and the next flight is on Wednesday—if you can get a seat. We went through the border in a hurry.

Fortunately, we reached "Friendship Bridge" before it closed for the day. Nepal, at last! There was relief. As we proceeded to Kathmandu, there were several checks by the military, because of political insurgencies in Nepal.

The highlight was when we finally arrived, late in the evening, at a real hotel in Kathmandu. A bath, at last! I soaked for more than an hour under the shower.

The Kailash Yatra had been successfully completed!

The inner journey was replete with meaningful experiences. About it, all I can share is a deep inner silence. And how could it be otherwise? Drawing from the words of Sri Ramakrishna, I can say I went to the mango orchard and ate the sublime fruit that is the Kailash Yatra. I can tell you about the orchard, but as for the mango—you have to eat one yourself!



DINODIA

SHUTTERSTOCK

## Never the Same: Reflecting on My Journey

LOOKING BACK AT THE MORE THAN SEVEN years since the blessed experience of my Holy Kailash Yatra, I stand amazed at how much work it was to prepare and then do it. But I am much more in awe of how much I have benefitted. *Immensely* is a word that would not do it justice.

It is true that concrete blessings manifest: the only property I own, in the heart of Bangalore, came to me in auspicious ways right after my return. But most of the benefits have come at a *sookshmam*, or subtle, level. No doubt we often follow an act of worship with a request trailing the prayer; but this was not my motivation at all. All boons from the pilgrimage were just an incidental consequence. All that I did, I did it as an offering to Siva—*Sivaarpanamasthu*! Yet, this yatra indeed had a significantly deep impact on me, my personal life and my world view.

The Kailash Yatra enhanced my understanding and faith in Lord Siva, the versatile God who is simultaneously experienced by many as an accomplished yogi amongst the living, the dying and the dead; as a householder like many of us, setting the example for a spiritual family life and marriage; and Lord Siva the accomplished sadhaka in Kailash, steady, calm and absorbed as Parabrahman.

I now see Siva as Mount Kailash, who stands still and resilient despite the erosion, the ravaging mountain slides, corroding streams and rivers around it. He is a true sanyasin and a *parivrajaka* (wandering mendicant). And within my heart, my eternal Siva

remains an inspiration for leading a life of sadhana, appropriately blending modern-day commitments with spiritual practices, for that leads to an unruffled, steady determination that results in success.

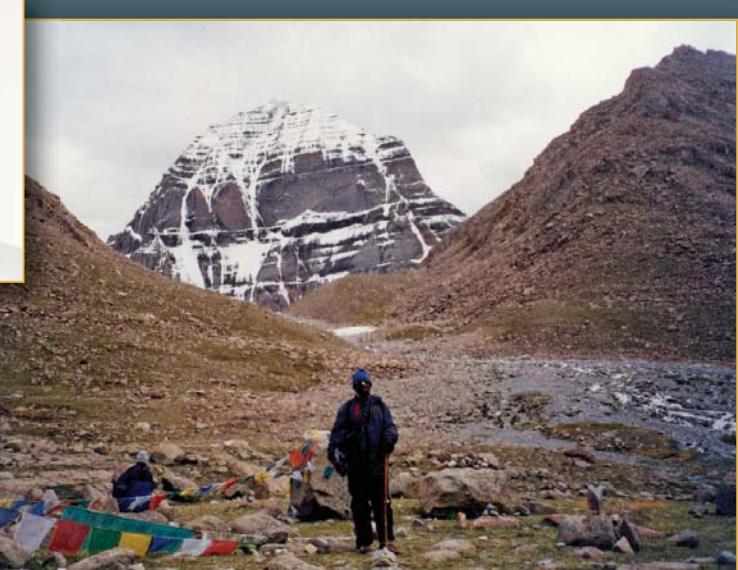
The holy Kailash Yatra freed me from incongruous notions about how we treat other religions, and our own. Seeing Hindus, Buddhists, Jains and Bön-pas simultaneously and harmoniously worshiping Kailash was overwhelming. The Bön-pa and the Hindu wished each other "Aum Namah Sivaya" and "Taashi Delek" with true mutual respect. We celebrated the differences, rather than being either exclusivist on one extreme or diluting our faith on the other. In this light, the bland and mildly offensive term "tolerance" (would you "tolerate" your guests?) and the extremes of terrorism seemed even more absurd.

After my return, something that jarringly stood out was the extent to which our society opposes the spiritual drive that impelled me to do the yatra. The impulse for a pilgrimage is embedded in our spiritual traditions. Yet, those traditions are daily eroded by insidious attacks coming from inimical and intolerant modern or secular lifestyles. The sensory stimulations of modern life are largely adharmic; how do we keep from being sabotaged by them? How to preserve and protect the profound purity found in an experience such as the pilgrimage to Kailash? The printed media, TV and the Internet erode our inner life. In fact, neither the schooling system nor our contemporary culture respect a need for sadhana.

The mark of a successful yatra to Kailash is to become able to see Siva everywhere else

(right) The author, Dr. T.S. Mohan (inset), stands at a high elevation lookout near Mount Kailash, Siva's home. Prayer flags (on the ground to his right) are offered here, as this is the only observation spot from which pilgrims have a good view of the sacred mountain.

(opposite page, background) A typical site in the Himalayas, where gigantic mountains encase life in the lower valleys through which cold rivers flow. (first inset) The pilgrimage is done mostly above the levels of common clouds; sometimes, this is the view from the top, an endless sea of fluffy white surrounded by the mountain chain. (bottom inset) One of the many Himalayan villages of the Tibetan plateau. Simple and quaint, they subsist from basic agriculture, yak herding and occasional tourism.



PHOTOS COURTESY T.S. MOHAN

What has happened to the practicing Hindus? We allowed our spiritual traditions to become merely tolerated with contempt, pushed to the sidelines of modern society rather than being at the center of what a person should pursue. That harms the nurturing of a culture that embraces sadhana in our everyday Hindu family life. It is up to us to strengthen our sadhanas, in spite of the opposition, and engage in religious festivities with the family and the community.

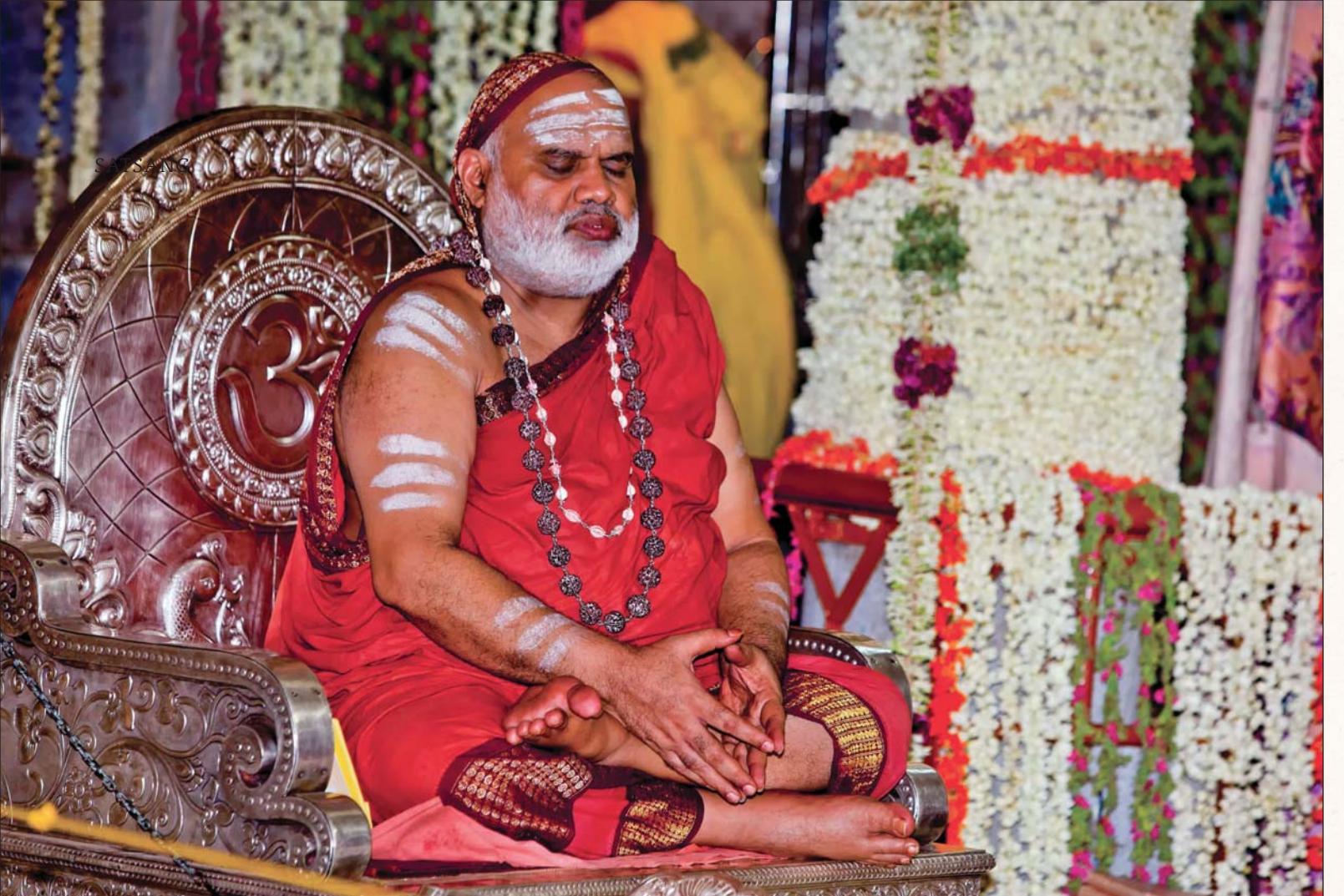
### It Should Not Stop at Kailash

I would like to add two key insights about a post-Kailash yatra life. First, customize and fine-tune your personal goals, having a clear plan that is aligned with your sadhana and spiritual values. Second, each one of us should go on pilgrimage at least twice a year, preferably with the family, for living Hinduism to the fullest is the best way of sharing blessings with all of them.

Where shall one go for a spiritual, or *adhyatmic*, yatra? There are plenty of worthy temples, ashrams and destinations. Just start searching.

From within India, for those who cannot go to Mount Kailash, there is the yatra to Adi Kailash (the Om Parvati mountain, strikingly similar to Kailash) in Uttarakhand. The trek is organized by Kumaon Mandal Vikas Nigam ([www.kmvn.org](http://www.kmvn.org)) in the summers.

Lord Siva can be sincerely worshiped anywhere, be it in the Himalayas or on the banks of Wailua River on Kauai. Let us pray that our sadhana efforts hold strong, and that by worshiping Siva we can transform for the better both ourselves and the world.



## INTERVIEW

# Sringeri Shankaracharya Takes Our Questions

The sage speaks about child-rearing, the guru, reconversion to Hinduism and more

INTERVIEW BY CHOOIDE SIVARAM, BENGALURU

During his April, 2011, birthday celebrations, Jagadguru Sri Sri Bharati Tirtha Mahaswamiji, 61st Shankaracharya of Sringeri Math, kindly consented to an interview for the readers of HINDUISM TODAY and responded to questions about modern Hindu living.

### How can parents instill spirituality in their children?

It is the duty of parents to inform and educate their children about our culture from a tender age. For example, as children, we were regularly told stories from the *Puranas*, *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata* and *Bhagavata*. We took in these stories and their morals and ethics. The glory of God, how He saved and elevated His devotees, the way devotees sought Him—these were etched in our minds. It made us resolve to live the same way, carrying these values, as our ancestors had done before us. Thus, whenever any Western hero is highlighted, we were certain that nobody could be greater than our own Rama. And not just at home. These stories were taught to us in our textbooks

when I was in school—*Ramayana*, etc., as well as stories of the great pilgrim centers of our land. I don't think there are any lessons in our textbooks today that highlight and showcase our culture. This is a very serious setback. If an environment to understand our culture is created at home and school, then elevating our children and making them worthwhile citizens is possible. But the situation is now the diametric opposite. Children do not learn our culture at home or school, and are being instead exposed to alien and contrary cultures through TV and cinema. Under these adverse influences, they are becoming rebellious and treating their parents with disregard.

### What is your advice for Hindu parents in other countries?

Haven't these parents come from here, India? Whether they are in America or in London, our culture does not change—praying to God, keeping a tulsi plant in front of the house, touching the feet of parents—these are simple things. The parents have grown up in Hindu culture and should carry it and inculcate it in their children wherever they are.

### Can the guru's grace be received by darshan, sight, alone?

That depends on the power of the guru. Some gurus speak to devotees. Some of them are in such an elevated state that the mere sight of such a guru makes our life fruitful. These great gurus can transform lives and cleanse people of all sins by just their glance. Chandrasekhara Bharathi Mahaswamiji (1982-1954), the 34th pontiff of Sringeri, is proof of this. Sixty years ago, there was a publication called *The Searchlight*, published from Patna. Its editor, M. S. M. Sharma, was an atheist who would ridicule anyone who had faith in God. In 1926, one of his friends, a devotee of Sringeri, brought him to have darshan of Guruji. Refusing to adhere to protocol of wearing a dhoti and veshti, he insisted on coming in Western attire. Upon his arrival, Chandrasekhara Bharathi had come out to give darshan to people. Sharma was standing behind him, amused at people's stupidity in bowing to a person simply because he was wearing saffron robes. Guruji turned around, and the moment his eyes fell on Sharma, some intense transformation happened in him. Sharma fell to the ground and prostrated, not knowing what was making him do so. As he wrote later of this experience, "Then the miracle happened. The very glance of the guru in a second removed all my atheism. I fell in surrender and could not get up. Guruji asked me to get up and enquired who I was. I told him I was a sinner and had sought him to elevate me. He asked me to come the next day and I went. It was only then I became a human being. Till then, I was an animal. He did not do anything, just a glance."

### What is the proper way to approach a guru?

Once, when Guru Chandrasekhara Bharathi was on a tour, a Muslim police officer came to see him. He asked the Math officials who received him about the appropriate protocol. The Math officials told him, "You can meet him the same way you would meet your religious head." One approaches the guru in the same way your culture guides you when meeting a respected elder person.

### How can one avoid being misled by some gurus?

There is a difference between the old days and now. In ancient times, the guru was without duplicity or deceitful motives. He would impart knowledge to the disciples with a pure heart. Thus, there was no room for any suspicion. Now, there is a proliferation of gurus, some of whom wear the saffron robes with the very intent of cheating those who come to them as seekers. It is not wrong for people to be cautious and alert with such people posing as spiritual teachers. Adi Shankaracharya said, "One who has complete knowledge of the scriptures, one who ceaselessly yearns for the good of others, such a person is a guru."

### What is your view on re-conversion to Hinduism?

"Reconversion" is a misnomer. Say, for example, that our child leaves home out of some misunderstanding or bad judgment and goes to someone else's house. If we bring him back home, we have just brought him back where he belongs. How can this be reconversion? His leaving home was wrong, but bringing him back home is not wrong.

### Why are hatred and conflict increasing, despite our affluence?

Because desire is increasing, there is no contentment. As long as man does not have satisfaction, there is no peace. When our wants keep increasing, where is the room for peace? People believe the myth that

money can make them great. What use is a big bank account, if there is no peace? Even if I am a millionaire, I can only eat so much. In that case, why employ wrong means to acquire wealth and harm others? If people realize this, they will not take a wrong path. Adi Shankara said, "Take not pride in your wealth, position, power or vitality. None of this is permanent. Believe only in God. Resort only to God."

### What is your advice for sannyasins?

The primary reason to take sannyas is for the monk's own spiritual development. The seeker, wishing to be free from the bonds of this material world, realizes that sannyas is the only path to attain liberation. Thus, he becomes a mendicant and proceeds along this path by practicing self inquiry and meditation on God and the Self, with dispassion and repetition of the syllable Om. His first aim should be to achieve spiritual elevation. Thereafter, if he gets an opportunity to convey a good message to someone, he should. If someone comes to him with a doubt, and he has the capability to ease their troubles and relieve their doubt, then he should do so. But beyond this, he should not indulge in or get drawn into any material matters. Else, the very purpose of his taking sannyas, to end the cycle of birth and rebirth, is defeated. The renunciate must be completely detached from the material world.

### What is your message to the readers of HINDUISM TODAY?

First, give up hatred towards the other. Look at everyone with love and affection. Help others; if not, at least do not harm others. Secondly, never lose faith and belief in God. Believe in Him through whichever name you choose, but never stop believing. Worship God with dedication and devotion, and you will receive His Grace. My complete blessings to HINDUISM TODAY. You have been able to deliver righteous thoughts to people through your magazine. With God's grace, may HINDUISM TODAY prosper.

.....

**Sampradaya:** Students studying the Vedas at Sringeri Peetham



# Mantra

*The recitation of mantras, known as *japa*, lies at the very heart of Hindu practice. Focusing the mind on Divinity as part of one's daily *sadhana*, it unites *bhakti* with meditation, body with mind, worship with introspection, opening inner doors to realms beyond the senses.*

INTRODUCTION BY SATGURU  
BODHINATHA VEYLANSWAMI

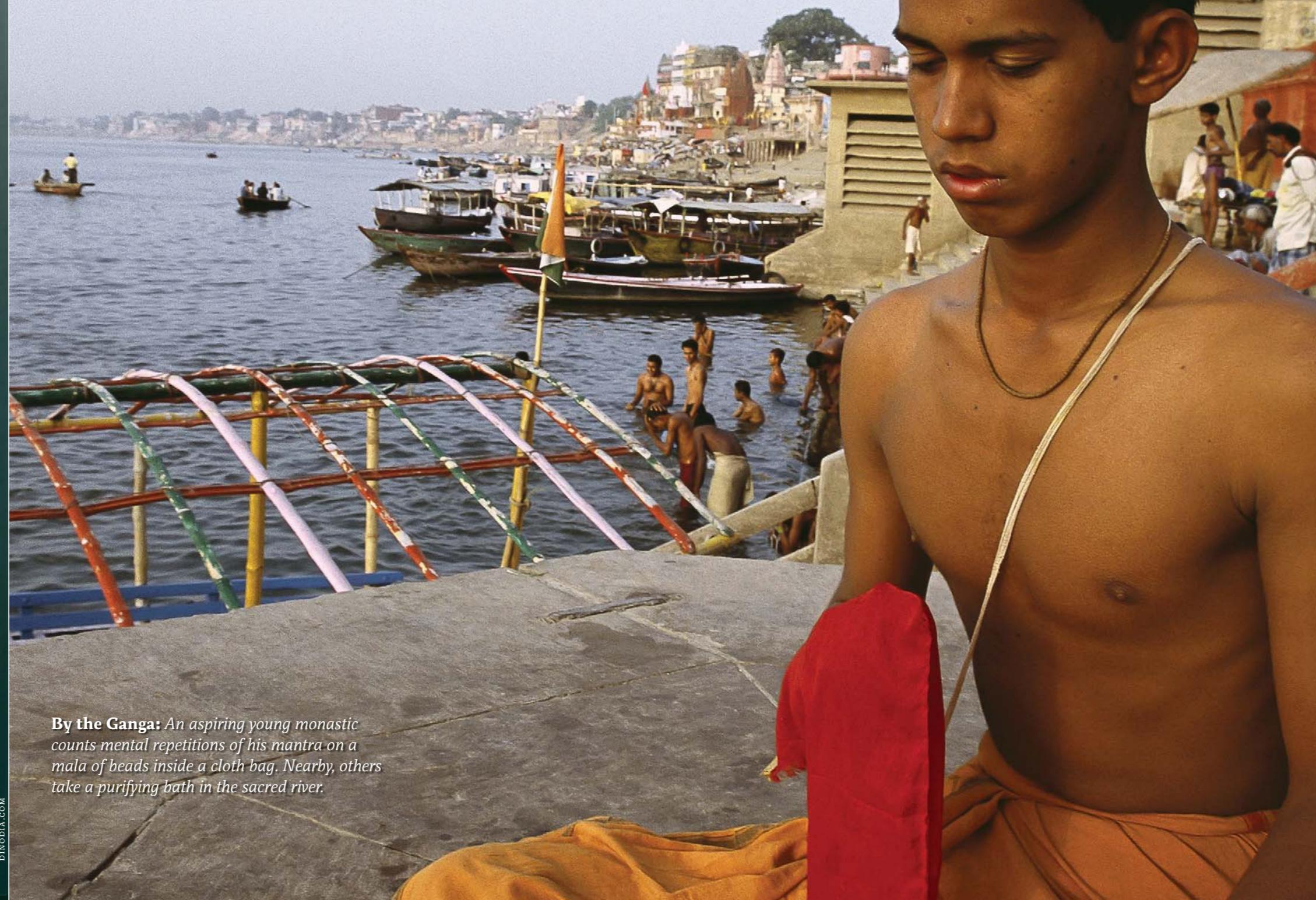
**A** mantra is a syllable, word or phrase endowed with special power, usually drawn from scripture. Mantras are chanted loudly during puja to invoke the Gods and establish a spiritual force field. Certain mantras are repeated softly or mentally for *japa*, or *mantra yoga*, the subtle tones quieting the mind, harmonizing the inner bodies and stimulating latent spiritual qualities. Hinduism's universal mantra is Aum.

Japa refers to the repetition of a mantra, often while counting on a *mala* or strand of beads. It may be done silently or aloud. Japa is one of the ten *niyamas* (spiritual practices) of *ashtanga yoga*, often performed prior to meditation. It is a major *sadhana* in Hindu spiritual practice, from the simple utterance of one or more names of God to extraordinary feats of repeating sacred syllables millions of times for years on end. Japa is recommended as a cure for pride and arrogance, jealousy, fear and confusion. It harmonizes the *doshas* and quiets the *vrittis*. Filling the mind with divine sounds, awakening the divine essence of spiritual energies in the physical body, *japa* brings forth the *amrita*. *Doshas* are the three bodily humors, which, according to *ayurveda*, regulate the body: *vata*, *pitta* and *kapha*. *Vrittis*, in *yoga* psychology, are the fluctuations of consciousness, the waves of mental activities of thought and perception. *Amrita* is the nectar of divine bliss which flows down from the *sahasrara* chakra when one enters the deepest states of meditation.

For Saivite Hindus, *Namah Sivaya* in its various forms is

# Yoga

*Spiritual  
Striving through  
Sacred Sound*



the most treasured mantra used in japa. The mantra *Hare Rama Hare Krishna* is among the foremost Vaishnavite mantras. Aum is a universal mantra. Sage Patanjali extolls it in his *Yoga Sutra*: "The mantra AUM should be repeated while contemplating on its meaning. Thence follows the attainment of inward-mindedness and the disappearance of the obstacles. Sickness, apathy, doubt, carelessness, sloth, sensual indulgence, false perspective, lack of progress and lack of consistency are all distractions to the mind and are the obstacles. Pain, depression, trembling limbs and irregular inhalation and exhalation accompany these distractions" (I.23-31).

Patanjali speaks of 14 kinds of japa: daily (*nitya*), circumstantial (*naimittika*), the japa of desired results (*ka-mya*), forbidden (*nishiddha*), penitential (*prayashchitta*), unmoving (*achala*), moving (*chala*), voiced (*vachika*), whispered (*upanshu*), murmured (*bhrama*), mental (*manasa*), uninterrupted (*akhanda*), nonuttered (*ajapa*) and circumambulatory (*pradakshina*).

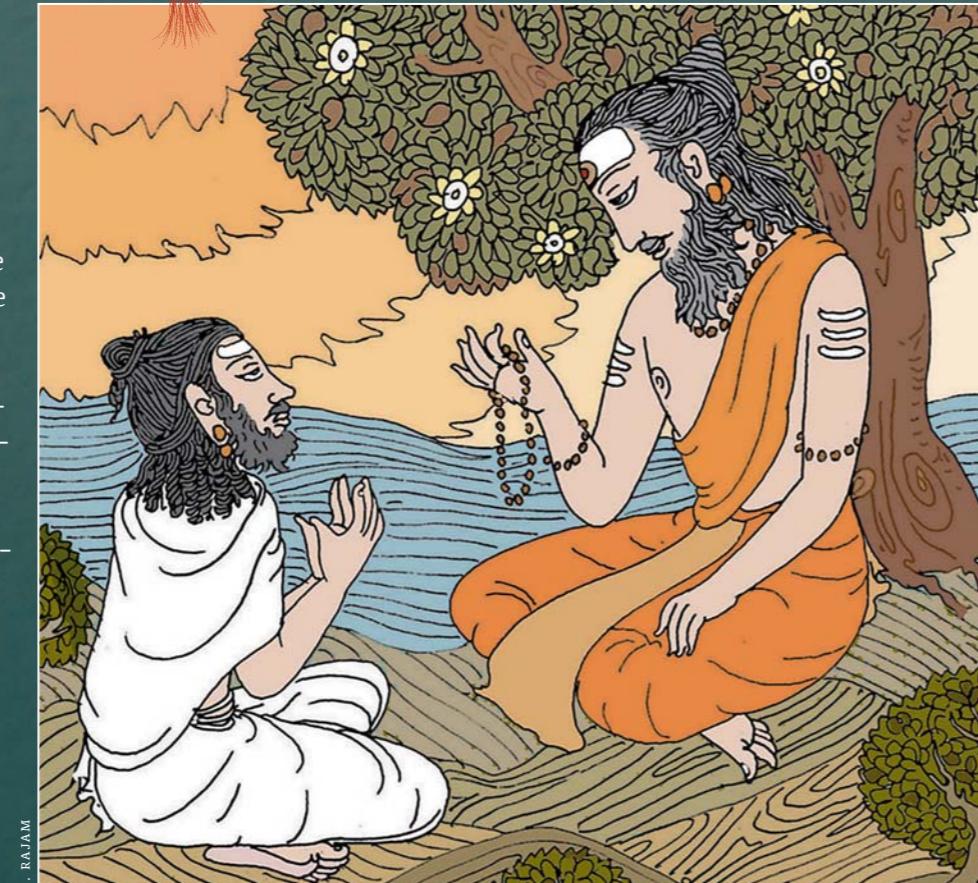
Here are four suggestions on how to perform japa.

1. Perform japa aloud in the beginning stages, as it is easier to concentrate the thought. Once you can perfect performing japa aloud, move on to performing it silently.

2. Pronounce the mantra slowly, properly, thoughtfully, with feeling.

3. Do not intensify japa by reciting your mantra tens of thousands of times a day unless specifically instructed to do so by your guru. Intensifying japa without a guru's guidance could produce negative results.

4. The best place and time to perform japa is in the temple or your home shrine after a puja. Thus practiced, japa will calm your mind, balance your inner and outer forces and strengthen your spiritual practice.



S. RAJAM

**Passing on the power:** (Left) A devotee receives instruction in mantra recitation from his guru; (right) a priest at the Sri Naranayi Pitham in South India counts the names of Shakti on a strand of small rudraksha beads



SRI NARAYANI PEEDAM

## The Magic of Japa

From the Teachings of Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami

**J**APA IS VERY WIDESPREAD IN HINDUISM, MORE SO THAN MEDITATION. JAPA yoga is easy to practice. The inexperienced can take it up immediately. It does produce certain results until they forget the mantra, which can happen! This may seem strange, but I have met devotees of gurus who had actually forgotten their mantra, even after paying a goodly sum to receive it. The innocent Americans and Europeans are the orphans and adopted children of Indian gurus. Some of these teachers, unaware of the critical differences of religion and culture of their newfound and eager devotees, respond by bringing them immediately into japa and raja yoga, avoiding the known initiations and the basic philosophical and cultural foundations necessary for ultimate success. In the case of Indian devotees, these cultural and philosophical foundations would have been acquired within the family home. This foundation is necessary, as it directs the subconscious mind, which is the inner motor of a person, preventing him from opposing, inhibiting and invalidating the realizations that naturally occur when one practices yoga. So, first we learn the philosophy, then through japa and more advanced yogas we realize it. Whereas in performing japa and raja yoga before you know the philosophy, what you previously learned may conflict with what you now realize. This can be very disconcerting.

When the philosophy is properly understood, we possess right thought, right speech and right action, which is proper behavior. This is culture. Humility and obedience before elders and those who are wiser is a very big part of Hindu culture, as is the regard for knowledge and wisdom and the deeper philosophies.

Therefore, a good character expressed day by day within the individual who is freed from anger and from contentious mental arguments is a central foundation for the practice of yoga.

One without such purity should not practice japa yoga, lest he awaken the knowledge of his imperfections which are better to keep veiled. For knowing such could send him into states of remorse, early repentance—which means being penitent before one has the stability to take on the reaction of such a momentous discovery and undertaking. Karma yoga should be practiced by the devotee prior to this to smooth out all character flaws. Sivathondu—which is another word for karma yoga—service to Siva, is the platform for japa yoga.

Those who are victims to episodes of anger, to pangs of jealousy or to periods of fear should not meditate and should not perform japa. They should perform Sivathondu, attend group meditations and group pranayama sessions. This is because they must first be lifted up into the muladhara chakra and above. They are living below it and must raise their consciousness in order to proceed deeply into themselves. It is the group itself in this case that will lift the individual who cannot easily lift himself. This process should be guided by a strong-minded, compassionate moderator.

### Japa Opens Inner Doors

One who performs japa properly will realize what he knows. You see, japa opens up the inner mind and focuses the energies of certain chakras, which are consciousness encased within the psychic nerve ganglia of the nadi network. Therefore, if he is a divine person, he will realize that Divinity. If he is an angry, selfish person, then he will realize that. We would want him to realize the former but not the

## **N**IN THE VEDAS

Yoga historically likely began with mantra yoga as its original form. The oldest yogic text and spiritual teaching coming out of India, the *Rig Veda*, is primarily a teaching of mantra yoga. The *Rig Veda* is composed of sacred chants (like the Gayatri Mantra to the Sun God) designed to invoke the cosmic powers within us for their blessings and guidance. The Vedic ritual is based upon Agni or the sacred fire, which is regarded first of all as a power of divine speech and mantra. This sacred fire, which is inwardly the power of speech, serves to invoke and manifest all the deeper powers of the psyche and the greater cosmos. This Vedic mantra yoga is still accessible to us through learning Vedic chanting. Yet we should learn to use Vedic mantras along with the breath and meditate upon their profound meanings if we want the deeper aspects of the Vedic yoga to become clear to us.

Vamadeva Shastri

## RISHI TIRUMULAR ON JAPA YOGA

By One Letter, A, He all worlds became. By Two Letters (A and U), He the Two became—Siva and Sakti. By Three Letters (A, U and M), He the Light became. By Letter M was Maya ushered in. 885

This is the way to chant: "Sivayanama, Sivayanama." If you chant that way, no more birth will be. With the Lord's grace, you shall behold the eternal dance; and copper (that is Jiva) turns into gold (that is Siva). 905

This mantra is golden; chant it not loud, just say it. Your body glows red. If you take it in slowly, as you breathe in, your body becomes gold, and in time, you shall behold the golden feet of the Lord. 906

You shall behold the golden feet; you shall have children noble. In the name of that golden feet I say, the copper that is jiva will become gold that is Siva, and as you behold the golden feet, you too shall His form assume. Center the mantra in your thoughts, and witness the goodly dance of golden feet. 907

*Tirumantiram*

**Counting on sacred beads:** (Right) Strands, called malas, of various rudraksha beads stacked high in an Indian store; (far right) A man prepares himself for the performance of japa



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latter. Through karma yoga, Sivathondu, the angry, hateful, contentious, competitive person will face himself through a series of small situations in which small realizations will occur. The instinctive nature and habits will be corrected until the individual is able to work smoothly over long periods of time. We would not want to open up his mind to the impurities, lest he become depressed or even morose and suicidal. Therefore, japa yoga obviously is an initiation that should come a little down the road, farther down the path.

Generally those who want to practice japa yoga and do have impurities working within them fall away from repetitive mantras very quickly, becoming a little afraid of what might happen if they are successful. Their own soul is watching after them in this early stage. Then there are those who are ardent, fanatical, you might say, who want to get results in a limited period of time and have no sense of the consequences. They work tirelessly to do this. The wise guru would discourage much practice of intense mantras or meditating alone, and would instead encourage karma yoga, giving to others, working for work's sake, serving for service's sake, not looking for rewards. Group meditations and group chanting are fine at this stage, as is temple worship, until the purification process has had time to work its magic.

### The Power of Initiation

Oftentimes japa and chanting are the ardha-Hindu's or non-Hindu's first introduction to Sanatana Dharma. An ardha-Hindu is often one who has been given a Hindu first name. It is our experience over the last fifty years that their japa has little effect unless they make the full commitment to becoming stalwart members of the Hindu

religion and join a mature community. Those who are inside a department store handling and purchasing the merchandise and those outside looking through the window at the same merchandise are two different groups. *Ardha* means half, and ardha-Hindus are those who have come half way to making a full commitment and are still making up their mind. They are still on the outside looking in. Their japa doesn't have much power until they bring other aspects of their life into line with the Hindu dharma.

For the non-Hindu who has not made a commitment, the universal mantra *Aum* is the most significant and precious of all mantras. This can be chanted by those of all religions, without restriction. The sounds of a city make "Aum." A child at birth says "Aum." A mother giving birth says "Aum." The last breath of a dying person is "Aum." Even the cows say "Aum." *Aum* is the mantra of Lord Ganesha. All are striving for His holy feet. Those who are struggling with the lower nature and those who have not made a commitment to the Sanatana Dharma (a commitment which for the newcomers to the fold could be verified by their Hindu name on their passport) should all chant *Aum*.

To demonstrate the authority vested in the mantra, let me tell you a story. A minister in a court was summoned before the maharaja. The minister also happened to be a brahmin priest, a kulaguru with the power to give initiation in the most sacred mantra, *Aum Namah Sivaya*. The king asked him, "We would like you to initiate me into the sacred Panchakshara Mantra." The guru said, "Yes, Majesty, I shall begin preparing you for your initiation." Then the king decreed: "No, we will take the initiation right now, and never mind the preparations." The kulaguru objected, "This is quite impossible. My guru

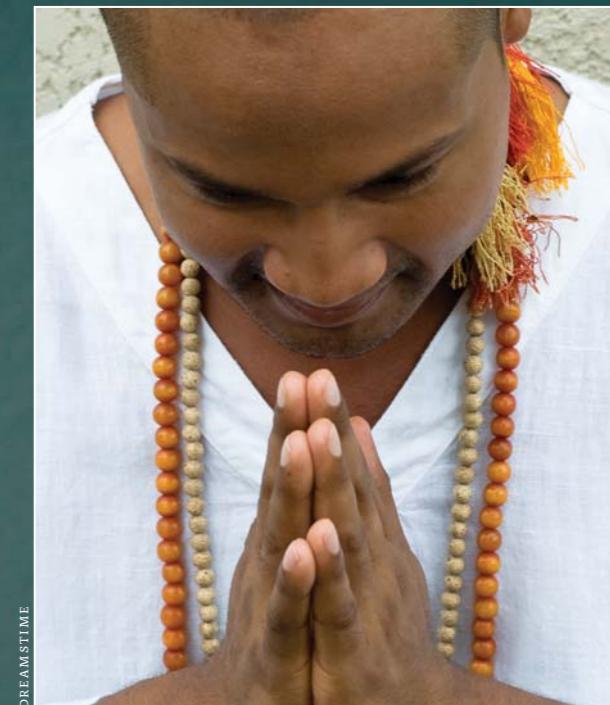
restricts me from giving initiation without due preparation." The king retorted, "So, we will do the mantra without you. Or else explain to me how the mantra would work differently with the initiation than without." The kulaguru said, "Yes, Majesty, I shall give you an explanation."

In a loud voice, the guru called to the five guards standing amidst the gathered audience, "Guards, come forward instantly and arrest this man, the maharaja, he is into wrongdoings. He is demanding an initiation into the great Panchakshara Mantra without the willingness to undergo the necessary preparations required by our noble sampradaya." The guards stood silent, eyes wide, looking at the maharaja, wondering what to do.

The maharaja, losing his composure upon hearing his minister's preposterous command, was struck with awe and thought, "What madness has overcome this holy man?" He then shouted to the guards, "Here, promptly: arrest this minister of mine, this kulaguru who is behaving in such an insolent manner against the throne. Tie him securely and take him away." The guards rushed forward without delay, grabbed the guru and held him tight.

The guru laughed and said, "Hold on a minute! I was just answering your question, Majesty. I spoke the mantra 'Arrest this man.' However, since I am not initiated into the court, not ordained to have that power, the guards stood idle and did not respond. You then gave the same mantra, 'Arrest this man.' Because you were carefully prepared and initiated as king, the guards responded."

Upon hearing this, the maharaja threw himself at the kulaguru's feet. The guards who had been hearing the entire conversation then released their captive, and themselves touched the holy man's



DREAMSTIME

## HOW TO CHANT AUM

For *Aum* japa to be effective, the mantra must be pronounced correctly. The first syllable is *A*, pronounced as the English word "awe," but prolonged: "aaa." The second syllable is *U*, as in "roof," pronounced "oo" but prolonged: "ooo." The third syllable is *M*, pronounced "mm" with the front teeth gently touching and the sound prolonged: "mmmm."

Each repetition is sounded for about seven seconds, with two seconds on *A*, two seconds on *U* and three seconds on *M*, with a silence of about two seconds before the next repetition.

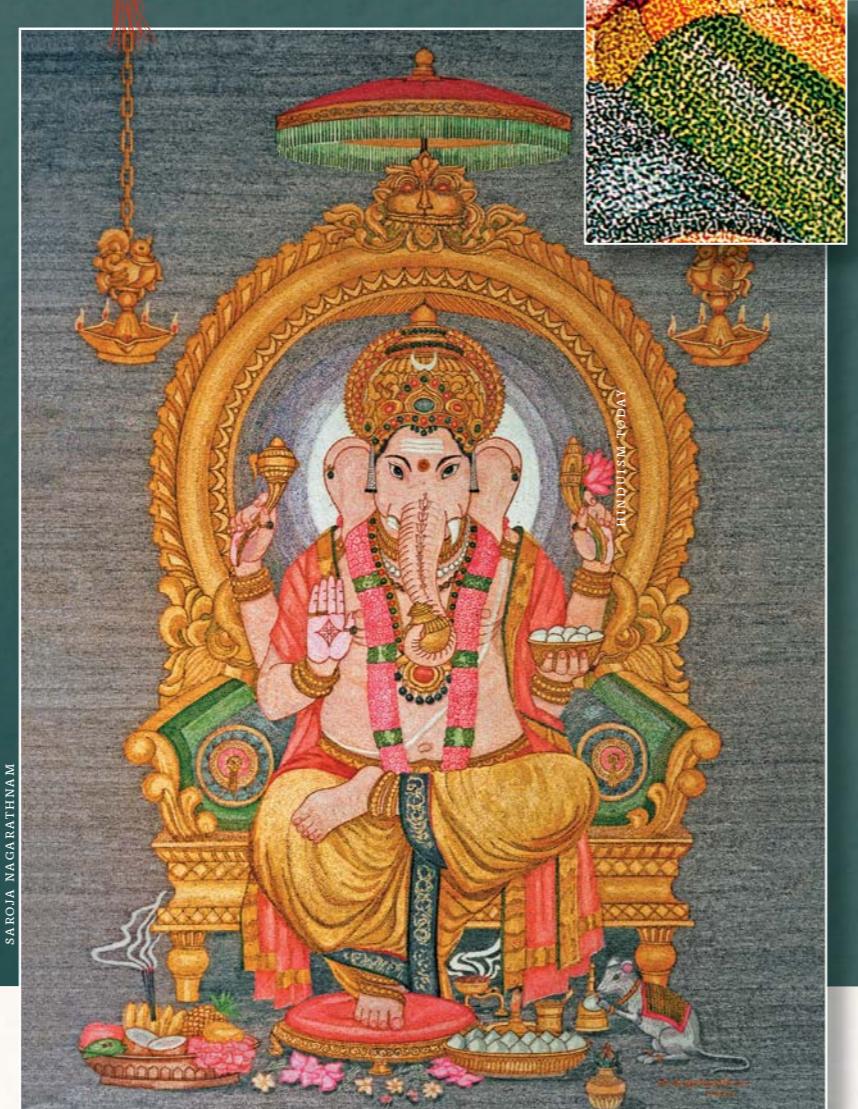
The three syllables are run together: AAUUMM (silence), AAUUMM (silence), AAUUMM (silence). On the first syllable, *A*, we feel the solar plexus vibrating. On the second syllable, *U*, the throat vibrates. The third syllable, *M*, vibrates the top of the head. Thus, proper chanting of *Aum* also is a high form of yoga, moving energy from the lower chakras of the body up to the highest chakra, or energy center—the sahasrara chakra at the crown of the head.

*From the teachings of Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami*



## LIKHITA JAPA

This masterpiece at right is no ordinary painting. It is a modern specimen of an ancient Indian art form, *likhita japa*, which is rarely practiced today. The piece was painstakingly composed in Chennai by Mrs. Saroja Nagarathnam in 1979–1980. The artist took quill in hand and wrote hundreds of thousands of times the mantras *Om Gam Virasiddhi Vinayakaya Namaha*, *Om Gam Gaum Gam Ganapataye Namaha* and *Om Gam Ganapataye Namaha* in the Tamil language. Every line and shade, every nuance, was created by patiently scribing these sacred syllables, so minuscule they are barely visible to the unaided eye, even in the three-foot-tall original. Unlike most works of art, its special form makes it proper to use in the home shrine for purposes of puja worship and meditation. May Lord Ganapati bless the world with peace, abundance and that most precious of all gifts—liberation.



SAROJA NAGARATHNAM

feet and returned to their posts. In the months ahead the maharaja meticulously prepared himself for and received his initiation.

### Deity Mantras

The mantra is the name of the inner-plane being whom you are calling. If you say, "Aum Namah Sivaya," are you ready to see what Siva will show you, once He comes and lifts the veils? Maybe a little preparation—cleaning a few things, straightening up the house, the subconscious basement—is in order first. If you say, "Aum Sharavanabhava," is your mind really ready to become peaceful, or is it disturbed by fits of anger? But every soul is ready to say, "Aum," and come to the feet of the Lord of Categories, who will set everything in order from the many yesterdays.

If you are in the temple worshiping Lord Murugan, the mantra Aum Sharavanabhava obviously has a total, overall effect. If you say "Aum, Aum, Aum" in front of Ganesha, Ganesha becomes conscious of your presence. The Deities are present in the temple. They may not be present in a person's home or under a tree. The main effect the mantra would have there would be to focus the concentration and quiet the mind.

If someone is already meditating and is self-instructed, not under a guru, and working for an eventual initiation to receive a mantra upon which to do japa, then whatever japa is performed should neither be too much nor too intense. We suggest for the non-Hindu Aum, and for the uninitiated Saivite Aum Sharavanabhava, 108 repetitions prior to meditation. This is totally on the safe side and will greatly enhance

the meditation.

There is an idea that there is a special mantra for each person, and that a mantra should be secret. It has been my experience that gurus who are amassing wealth from unsuspecting Americans and Europeans will give all kinds of mantras. And they will be couched in a format that is sellable, like packaged merchandise. They will be made secret. But none of the traditional mantras that produce true realization and are lauded and acclaimed are secret. They are well known by every Hindu in the world. Each Hindu throughout the world knows whether he has purified himself or not, and prepared himself or not, sufficiently to pronounce them—though he may pronounce them at any time he wishes, and an impact and a beneficial effect will follow in his life. But the spiritual impact of pronouncing a mantra after earning an initiation (this does not mean paying for it, but earning it through study and practice, character building, improving, proving oneself to one's guru), that effect, is life-altering. It cleans the karmas of many past lives, perfects the lives of the future, and lays the foundation for moksha at the end of this or a future life. Let this not be misunderstood.

Many people want initiation because they want to get away from something. They want something to cure their ills. Others don't know what they want. They are disturbed, distraught with their

## STONE-MELTING DEVOTION

Hanuman was so devoted to Ram, so filled with love for him, that he wanted nothing more than to continually remember Him. Not for one moment would he allow thoughts of his Lord to leave his mind, and so he continually lost himself in chanting Ram's name. Hanuman was an accomplished musician, and often accompanied his chanting with the vina—a stringed instrument also played by Narada, the celestial sage who wanders among the worlds chanting Narayana's name. Once in his wanderings Narada happened to overhear Hanuman's chanting and was so attracted by the power and sweetness of his devotion that he set his own vina aside, and joined Hanuman in his chant. The intensity of Hanuman's devotion and the loveliness of his song were so powerful that they melted even the hardness of granite; the rock on which Narada's veena was resting softened, and the instrument sank gently into the stone. When Hanuman stopped chanting, the rock hardened and Narada's vina was held fast. Narada begged Hanuman to begin chanting again; Hanuman of course was more than happy to comply: "Rama, Rama, Rama," he chanted. Once again the rock melted with his devotion, and Narada was able to retrieve his vina.

*A story from the Padma Purana submitted by Ganga/Marlene Roeder Gangamar108@yahoo.com*



**Mantra calligraphy:** (Left): A portrait of Lord Ganesha created entirely of mantras penned in colored ink. (Inset): A closeup of the artwork shows the tiny mantras used to "paint" this picture. (Right): Lord Hanuman sings to his Lord Rama.

*prarabda* karmas, and they want relief. What they should be given is Saiva Siddhanta—a comprehensive path of accomplishment. They should not be given a high-powered mantra that will, when it opens the mind, cause more frustration and disturbance from what the seeker sees. But once given such initiation—having no tools, mentally, emotionally or physically, to conquer the past karmas that the experiential emotions are intensifying (which should have been conquered through karma yoga and bhakti yoga)—the seeker falls into despair. It is the conscientious guru's responsibility to provide an ongoing, progressive training prior to initiation and to continue it afterwards. Those who make their living by selling mantras would be considered fraudulent by traditional Hindu standards.

### The Esoterics of Japa

Knowing the meaning of the mantra is very helpful when the devotee is visualizing it at the same time. Then he also knows when he reaches the goal which the mantra is supposed to produce within him. Since most mantras are in Sanskrit, it is easy enough to find the meaning in the Sanskrit dictionary. We must remember that the first mantras were given in the language spoken by the people. Sanskrit mantras were given to people who spoke Sanskrit. Yet, mantras could be phrased in other ancient sacred languages as well. It is just that the Sanskrit language relates to the unfoldment of the inner being, which most other languages don't do as much. However, even in the English language, or any language, rituals are performed that do invoke the spirit forces of the religion. It just so happens that in Hinduism, Sanskrit is the most accepted language of all, agreed upon by the

Hindu hierarchy of all three worlds.

Japa is a sadhana, and all sadhana is repetitive. Japa is taking a few words as a mantra and repeating it over and over again for mind control and personal enlightenment. This would attract good beings on the astral plane and strengthen the protective aura of the individual doing japa. There is no reason to think that performing japa would affect the astral world in any way other than to bring forth goodness, compassion and admiration of the beings there toward the devotee performing this discipline.

Namah Sivaya Aum and Aum Sharavanabhava have been revealed for spiritual unfoldment. They are not for magical purposes. Nor is japa intended for healing or other aims in the physical realm. True, Japanese Buddhists chant Aum Namo Myoho Renge Kyo for success, jobs and wealth, but this is not japa in the Hindu understanding. This is more along the lines of affirmation. Japa is very close to raja yoga. Japa leads to spiritual renunciation; raja yoga to enlightenment, stimulating the chakras of the head. Japa is never used in the Hindu tradition to pray for material things. Hindus do pray for material blessings, health and abundance but not through the use of mantras, or japa. For these they turn to prayers, songs and ritual, which stimulate the chakras of willpower, reason and cognition, giving the worshiper physical, emotional and mental vigor to bring the worldly goods into his hands. Mantras for japa are usually short, but not always. The Gayatri Mantra, consisting of thirteen words, is an example of a rather long mantra. In summary, japa is religiously repeating just a few important, well-defined words, syllables or "seed sounds," called bija, to awaken the higher nature.

# GUIDELINES ON THE USE OF MANTRAS

1. Chant the mantra with a *sattvic*, or pure, mind, which implies a peaceful intention and a calm frame of mind. Follow a sattvic lifestyle, including a vegetarian diet. Refrain from negative emotions, take time in solitude and make your life a form of service.
2. Honor the Divine power connected to the mantra before starting your practice, whether through mental acknowledgment, some form of ritual, or through a representative form like a statue or picture.
3. Seek further empowerment with the mantra from a guru, a holy site connected to its Deity, or through the forces of nature, like fire or water.
4. Make sure to pronounce the mantra properly. For this you may need to learn the basic rules of pronouncing the Sanskrit alphabet.
5. Initially chant the mantra out loud to gain a sense of its sound pattern. Then chant it softly on the breath to connect it to the prana. But most chanting will be mental, while you are silent outwardly.
6. Chant the mantra in a regular manner at a certain time of day for a certain number of times.
7. For counting mantras, it is best to use a mala, or rosary, of 108 beads.

Vamadeva Shastri

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Where did mantras come from? Mystical shlokas came from the rishis of ancient times who held conversations with the great Mahadevas and devas of the inner worlds. Out of this developed certain rituals that could, when performed properly, create certain causes in the physical world.

Because every sound has a color and creates a form on the astral plane when pronounced, the mantra must be pronounced properly, slowly, thoughtfully, with feeling, mentally seeing the color, mentally hearing the sound. The ideal way to perform japa 108 times is by also listening to the *nada-nadi shakti*, the high "eee" sound one hears within the head when in a high state of consciousness. To perform japa quickly, as in a marathon, sometimes called "machine-gun japa," brings little benefit. If you don't have time to do japa, don't do it at all. It should not be a meaningless ritual. It should be a very meaningful experience.

When we perform japa aloud, it is easier to concentrate the thought. The mantra is heard and therefore our mind does not wander. We must remember that letting the mind wander into irrelevant thoughts mitigates the benefits of the japa. Therefore, we must remain concentrated. We perform japa, which is a sadhana, for pragmatic benefits. There is no other reason. Therefore, we should keep our mind on what we are doing.

Visualize the proper colors that the mantra produces from one stage to the next. In Sharavanabhava Aum we visualize light blue fading into white and fading back into light blue, back and forth—"Sharavanabhava Aum, Sharavanabhava Aum, Sharavanabhava Aum." Blue is the color of the akasha, ether, and Sharavanabhava takes you there. Once the japa is perfected aloud, it may be done silently, simply by moving the lips but not making a sound, and then later making

he sound internally without moving the lips. The ultimate accomplishment in the performance of japa is the yoga of going to sleep while verbally and mentally pronouncing the mantra, which continues during the sleeping hours. Upon awakening, the same mantra is still being repeated, mentally and then verbally, without a break in continuity. This is quite an accomplishment, but it has been done.

## Getting the Most from Japa

The repetition of a mantra, especially if given by a guru, is a journey to a distant place; consciousness is altered. And it must be performed at an auspicious time. Preparation must be made—bathing, cleaning oneself properly—then devotions are performed in a room prepared for this purpose. We are taking a journey; the room, the body and the exact time of starting are the conveyance.

If precaution is not taken, or the mantra is chanted at an inauspicious time in a place that is not sanctified, and the chanter's body has not been cleansed, the mantra will work as it should, no problem here. But the person who is performing the incantations will be easily seen, due to the power of the mantra, by asuric entities, who will come and attach themselves to him and disturb him. In a clean and perfect place, under sanctified conditions, the incantation will attract devonic forces who will, in turn, help him on the path to his eventual enlightenment.

For the ultimate benefit in performing the japa sadhana, look on the Hindu Vedic calendar, *panchanga*, and choose the *amrita yoga* days. These are the most auspicious. Next are the *siddha yoga* days. On any given day, the most auspicious time is during *gulika kala*. These are the times when the forces of the universe—this means

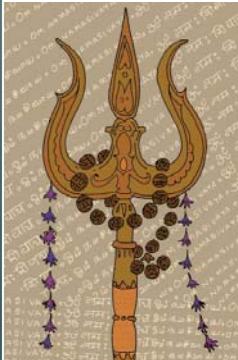
the entire universe, and most especially our galaxy—promote spiritual unfoldment. Of course, the daily experience of 108 repetitions should persist. Any intensification of this—1,008 times, for instance—would be best performed at a specially auspicious day and time. Other auspicious times of day are before sunrise and at sunset. The very best place and time to perform japa is in the temple after the puja, when all is quiet. This is the most ideal surrounding to repeat japa 108 times to gain maximum benefit. When performing japa, just breathe normally. Japa may be preceded by the pranayama practice that you have been taught by your guru.

Japa is a very good preparation for meditation. And you meditate on the mantra as you do the mantra. You can't meditate on the mantra without repeating the mantra inwardly. When the mantra is linked with meditation, it should be pronounced slowly so that you can meditate on each syllable of the mantra that is being repeated. You must remember that japa is the repetition of a few words or a few syllables. That is the adhana of japa. Everything else is something else.

My satguru, Siva Yogaswami, placed great emphasis on japa, repeating the name of Siva with concentration and feeling. This great Natha jnani explained, "May we not forget that mantra is life, that mantra is action, that mantra is love, and that the repetition of mantra, japa, bursts forth wisdom from within. Japa yoga is the first yoga to be performed toward the goal of jnana. In the temple perform japa. Under the sacred tree, perform japa. I performed japa all of this life as a silent sadhana, and it is automatic now." Siva Yogaswami enjoined his devotees: "Wear rudraksha beads, repeat the Panchakshara, let your heart grow soft and melt. Chant the letters five, and in love you will discover Siva's will. Chant so that impurities, anxieties and doubts are destroyed. All hail Namah Sivaya."

# SEEING GOD EVERYWHERE

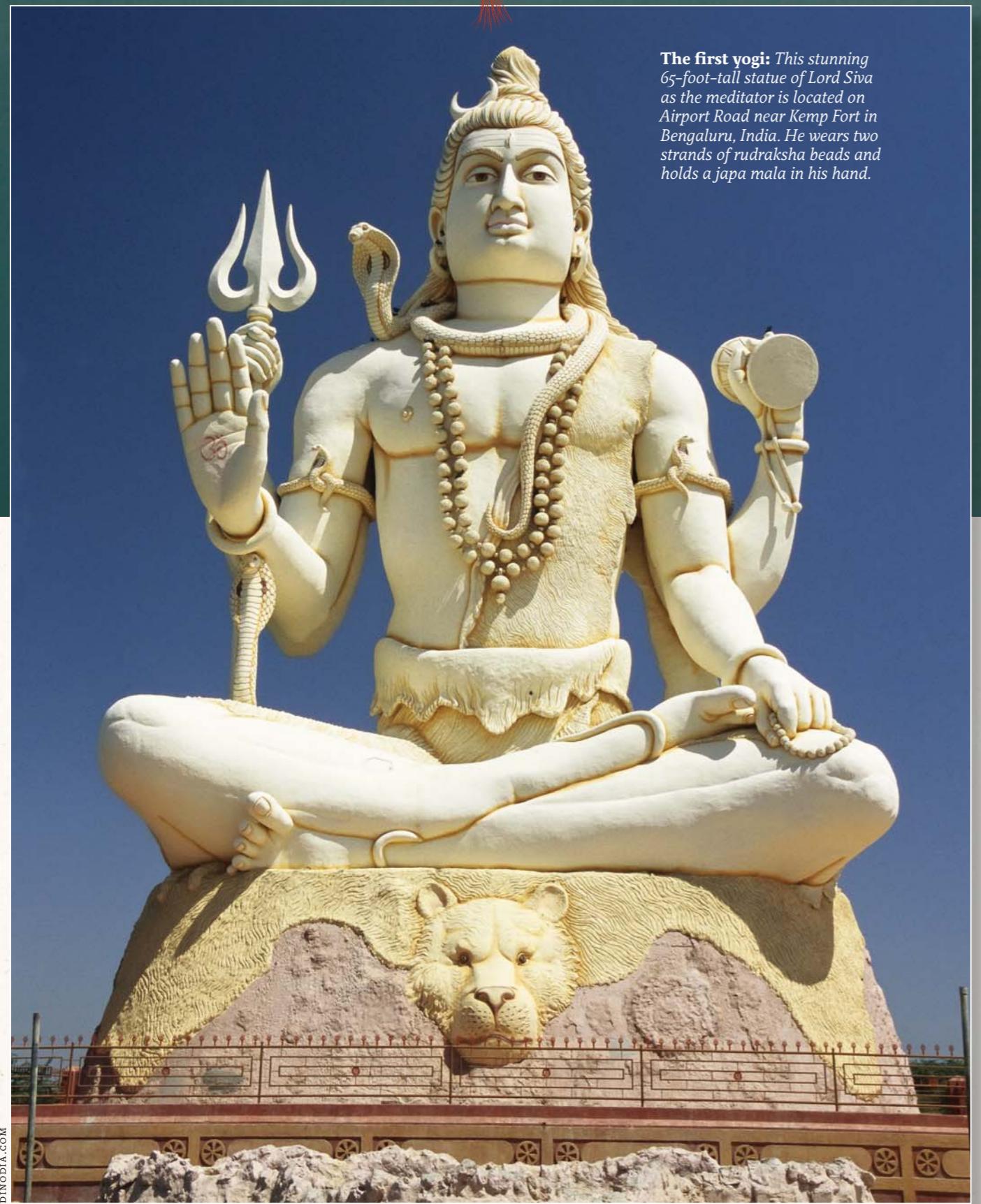
It is natural to forget about God, but there are many helpful ways that we can avoid distraction, that we can remember to keep seeing God



A. MANIVEL

everywhere. Repeat "Aum Namah Sivaya." When life becomes difficult or strained, say to yourself, "Siva Siva" or "Aum Sivaya" or "Namah Sivaya." Mentally put it all at His feet. See Him in everyone that you meet or confront, regardless of the circumstances. He is there as their life force, but you just need to quiet the mind to see. Smile when you feel unhappy with someone and say to yourself, "How nice to see you, Siva, in this form." Animals, beggars, princes, politicians, friends and enemies, holy men, saints and sages are all Siva to the soul that loves God. He smiles and thinks to himself, "How nice to see you, Siva, in this, another of your many forms." For Nathas, the repetition of the sacred Panchakshara Mantra, Namah Sivaya, is the key to the awakening of Sivaness within each and every devotee on the path to Lord Siva's holy feet. This knowledge unfolds from within as these great mantras are incanted, such as "Aum Namah Sivaya," which will finally awaken the experience of Siva's perfect universe. Everything is in perfect harmony, law and order. Mantras are given by a guru, and this is important because his shakti gives the first impetus to proceed. It is not the same as when taken from a book, because the thrust is not there. It must come from a guru.

*Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami*



**The first yogi:** This stunning 65-foot-tall statue of Lord Siva as the meditator is located on Airport Road near Kemp Fort in Bengaluru, India. He wears two strands of rudraksha beads and holds a *japa mala* in his hand.

## THE INNER SOUND CURRENT

Laya yoga, the "yoga of mergence," involves meditation on the inner sound current, called *nada*, which arises when the mind becomes pure and clear. We can hear this vibratory sound if we close our ears and listen deeply with attentive awareness. Several types of *nada* exist. These are said to be like the sounds of a bell, a drum, a flute, the ocean or other sounds. *Nada* is the celestial music within us. We hear these sounds with our inner ear, the subtle counterpart of our gross organ of hearing. They reflect the sound of the cosmic intelligence inherent in space, which is the source of all knowledge.

*Nada* is the inner power behind the mantra. The outer mantra works to awaken the inner *nada*. Then the *nada* repeats the mantra, which is held in our inner sound current. The *nada* itself can as-

sume the form of the mantra. This indicates that the mantra is resonating with our inner being.

To meditate upon the *nada* is not just to listen to or to repeat a sound. It is also to inquire into the origin of sound, to follow the sound current back to its origin. This is to inquire into the origin of our own consciousness, which itself is a manifestation of sound. It is to contact our inner Self in the spiritual heart from which the sound current arises.

All forms of spiritual music come under the Yoga of Sound if we follow their vibrations back to the Divine Word within us. This includes vocal and instrumental music in all their beauty and diversity. Music, in turn, may be allied with poetry, drama and dance. Poetry is a kind of verbal music. Drama is the enactment of poetry. Dance is its expression. The internal usage of music can energize the various chakras that reflect the music of our soul.

*Vamadeva Shastri*

## Excerpts from *Mantra Yoga and Primal Sound*

By Vamadeva Shastri

### The Universal Tradition of Sacred Sound

**A**LL OVER THE WORLD WE FIND TRADITIONS OF SPECIAL words of power, magical phrases or secret codes that can unlock the great mysteries of life otherwise unapproachable to the human mind. Such traditions occur in religion, occult sciences, mysticism, shamanism and almost every known spiritual path. Poetry, literature and philosophy worldwide similarly recognize the power of the word, sound or prime concept to influence and move us at a very deep level. While accessing the cosmic powers may not be as simple as repeating a phrase like "open sesame," there are key sounds and words that can dramatically reveal new vistas of insight and energy within us.

While the yoga practitioners of India have developed sacred sound into an extensive science of mantra as discussed in detail in my book, it is important to note that the tradition of the transformative power of "the Word" is universal. What makes the yogic approach so important and compelling is that it looks at the power of sound and the Word in an experiential manner as part of a sacred approach to the whole of life and consciousness.

The Judeo-Christian tradition starts with God creating the universe through the Word: "Let there be light;" and there was light. The New Testament ponders, "In the beginning was the Word." The monastic history of Christianity includes prayer, chant and formalized words of meditation. Church services frequently include responsive chants of "Amen." The Jewish Kabala has mystic syllables and explains the Hebrew alphabet in a similar way relative to cosmology as the yoga tradition does the Sanskrit alphabet. Sufism relies on the power of oft-repeated prayers and divine names to bring life into harmony with the Spirit.

Taoism has an important tradition of healing sounds for body and mind that is used in Taoist yoga and traditional Chinese medicine. Buddhism has its own rich tradition of mantras, particularly in the Buddhist tantras and in Tibetan Buddhism. These are largely Sanskrit mantras and include many of the same mantras as in the Hindu yoga tradition. Shamanic healing from all over the world invokes healing powers through chant and prayer, with diseases expelled in its rituals through the use of an emphatic phrase or mantra. We find traditions of sacred sound in all ancient cultures, from Egypt and Babylonia to India, China and the Americas, as the ancient world lived more closely to the magic of the Divine Word.

Many traditions teach that if you know the name of something, you can gain mastery over it. This is an expression of the occult, mystical sense of being able to create the vibration or resonance of the object to fully identify with it. It is not the outer name, such as we find in a dictionary, which grants this power but the inner name that is a mantric vibration. There is a sound code or vibratory pattern behind the universe itself, embedded in the fabric of existence that holds the intelligence, information and energy forms through which all processes of life operate. Connecting to this universal vibration is the basis for the yogic pursuit of mantra.

Yet, apart from the mysticism of mantra, there is a practical side to mantra that is also gaining wide recognition today. *Mantra* as a term has entered into languages worldwide. *Mantra* is now commonly used to indicate a key word or phrase employed by various groups or individuals to summarize their views or relate their prime focus. This practical idea of mantra fits in well with the computer age, in which complex information is passed on in concentrated data



## JAPA BEADS

Malas are important tools of both worship and healing. They relate to different Deities and have their specific powers that can be used to hold the energies of mantras in different ways. When we use a mala with our mantra recitation, the power of the mantra enters into the beads of the mala, which become energized at a subtle level. The more often we use them, the greater their power becomes. The mala gathers and magnifies the power of the mantra, forming a sphere of energy and protection around us.

Rudraksha is the most commonly used bead for malas. It is the seed of a special tropical tree (*Eleocarpus ganitrus*). It comes in different forms, but overall it is heating and sacred to Lord Siva,



bits that connect us to wider fields of knowledge and energy. It is what we could call "the mantric approach of information technology." A mantra-like condensation of knowledge has become essential to modern communication and higher education. It is the ancient basis of the "Powerpoint" presentation, among many other such concentrated teaching devices.

The power of the Word is easily seen in our everyday lives, as the words help create the environment within which we live, for good or ill. Road rage is frequently accompanied by expletives, and the pent-up energy behind them frequently breaks out in fights, tension and traffic accidents. Political rallies and sports competitions use key phrases and chants to create a mass energy to stimulate action and bring about victory; to get the crowd involved, as it were, which can have positive or negative effects on a large scale.

The mass media world relies on key words, slogans and advertising phrases. Such short statements become the news stories in brief and can impact public opinion and sentiment globally, affecting us at subconscious and conscious levels. These concentrated sound messages are all mantras, or power words, of sorts. Through the science of mantra yoga, we can navigate our way through the influences of the dominant words reverberating around us to a higher truth, discerning the sounds that weigh down our consciousness from those that elevate it.

The reality behind these sacred or mundane uses of words of power is that words carry energy, creating and embodying the inner essence and forms of manifestations in the world. Each outer object has its own characteristic sound vibration that sustains it. Our own bodies, minds and hearts have their own characteristic sound patterns, which in turn are affected by the spectrum of sounds around us.

### Yoga as Sound

Mantra yoga provides us a means to understand sacred sound from the perspective of a tradition that has taken it beyond mysticism into

an organized and codified spiritual science. Mantra yoga includes a study of the qualities inherent in sound itself, through which words and meanings are either properly shaped or deformed. It shows how sounds impact the nervous system, mind and heart, and how we can modify them to improve our lives. Regardless of which background or tradition you may personally follow, the insights provided in mantra yoga can be of enormous value to enable you to manifest your destiny creatively, effectively and completely through understanding the power of the Word.

Mantra is a tool for connecting us with the spiritual wisdom and the energy of consciousness hidden in the universe as a whole. Mantra is a doorway to an awareness that exists beyond all limited bits of information or technical knowledge. Mantra summarizes an inner view of reality as a play of consciousness that can instantly comprehend the whole, grasping the totality in a single point focus of direct perception and immediate experience. The universe itself is ultimately an expression of a single mantra or vibratory sound energy.

Mantra in the yogic sense relates to the prime energies, ideas, principles or archetypes of the cosmic intelligence that directs the forces of nature and the movements of our own minds and hearts. Mantra is part of a universal language rooted in sound, image, number and symbol, reflecting a "cosmic thinking" beyond the preconceptions and biases of human thought. Mantra functions according to the inner mathematics of cosmic law. It serves to link our individual intelligence with the greater intelligence that pervades all space, extending



**A special charm:** (Left) Two women in Tibet chat while holding their prayer beads; (above) a beautiful selection of japa malas is laid out for sale in an Indian shop

our awareness into the Infinite and Eternal. To chant a mantra at a deeper yogic level is to think with the entire universe and to access the wisdom and experience of all beings.

There are mantric sounds that can awaken the higher potentials of the brain and change the flow of energy in the nervous system. Each one of us has a unique sound pattern that sustains all that we do and allows our energies to move and grow or stagnate and decline. Unless we learn to harmonize our inner sound vibrations, our lives will likely remain in disharmony and suffering. Mantra is the most important tool for attuning our bodies and minds to their proper resonance, which is not with the outer world, but with the divine presence that constitutes our own deepest Self.

Focusing on a specific mantra—particularly holding to a *bija* [seed] mantra—is one of the main methods of *dharana*, or yogic concentration. Continuously directing the mantra to a particular location like the tip of the nose or to a particular chakra turns it into a *dharana* practice. Very helpful in this regard is "mantra *drishti*," or the gaze of the mantra, in which one concentrates one's gaze along with the mantra, particularly on sites in the body like the heart, the third eye, the navel or the base of the spine.

As *asana* [posture] controls the body and *pranayama* controls the breath, so mantra controls the mind, not artificially but through a natural development of energy and attention. Mantra maintains the strength and integrity of our mental field, so that the mind no longer wanders off or loses its composure. Mantra sustains the proper circulation of energies in the sphere of the mind, so that we are no longer vulnerable to external conditioning which, after all, is based largely on reactive patterns of words and names.

Just as *asanas* place the body in a calm and relaxed state, so mantras put the mind into a steady and relaxed state for meditation. For example, repeating the mantra *Aum* has the same calming and uplifting effect upon the mind and heart that the lotus pose does for the body.

increasing *tejas* and *agni*. It also helps arouse the kundalini. There are several types of rudrakshas, with the smaller beads generally regarded as more powerful. However, the large, five-faced beads are also very powerful. They relate to the five faces of Lord Siva. One-faced beads relate to the Supreme Siva and pure unity. Two face beads are Siva-Shakti. Rudrakshas can be found with faces up to fourteen, which all have their special powers. Rudraksha, however, can be too hot for some people. One may need to combine it with sandalwood or crystal to make it suitable. Sandalwood malas are cooling and soothing to the mind and heart. They are sacred to Vishnu.

Tulsi, or holy basil, malas are stimulating and help open the mind and heart and are often used relative to Vishnu, Krishna or Dhanvantari. They are made of the wood from the bush. Crystal malas are cooling and clearing. They are often sacred to the Goddess, but can relate to Siva as well. Combined crystal and Rudraksha malas are Siva-Shakti. Coral malas are warming and strengthening. They are often used to promote the Siva energy as well. Astrologically, they relate to the planet Mars.

Malas can also be made of gems that reflect planetary energies. Garnet malas have a solar energy, pearl malas a lunar energy. Coral malas relate to Mars, green gemstones (like peridot) to Mercury, citrine to Jupiter, clear crystal to Venus, amethyst to Saturn, hessonite garnet to Rahu, and cat's eye to Ketu. Malas can be strung in gold, silver, copper or other types of threads. Gold is probably the most powerful.

Wearing a mala, one should note, is not a matter for public display or a fashion statement. While one can wear a protective mala at all times, one usually keeps special *sadhana* malas away from public contact, viewing or touch. Remember, the mala is a sacred implement that itself needs to be honored.

*Vamadeva Shastri*

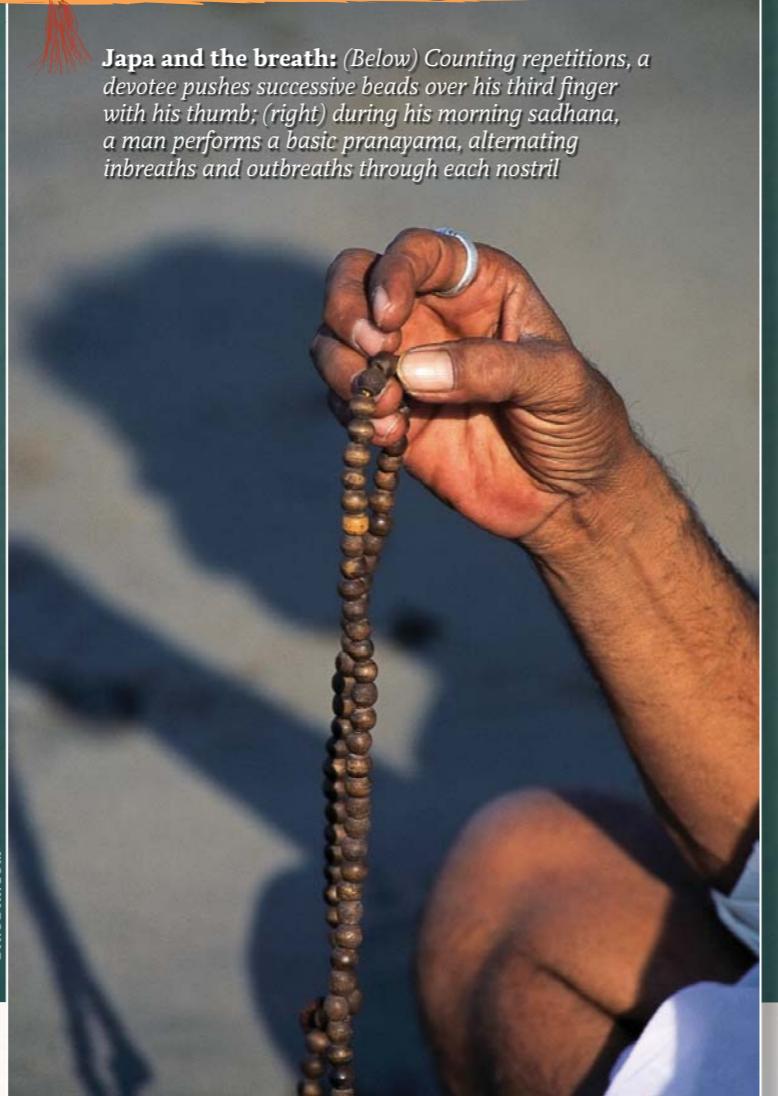


## THE YOGA OF SOUND

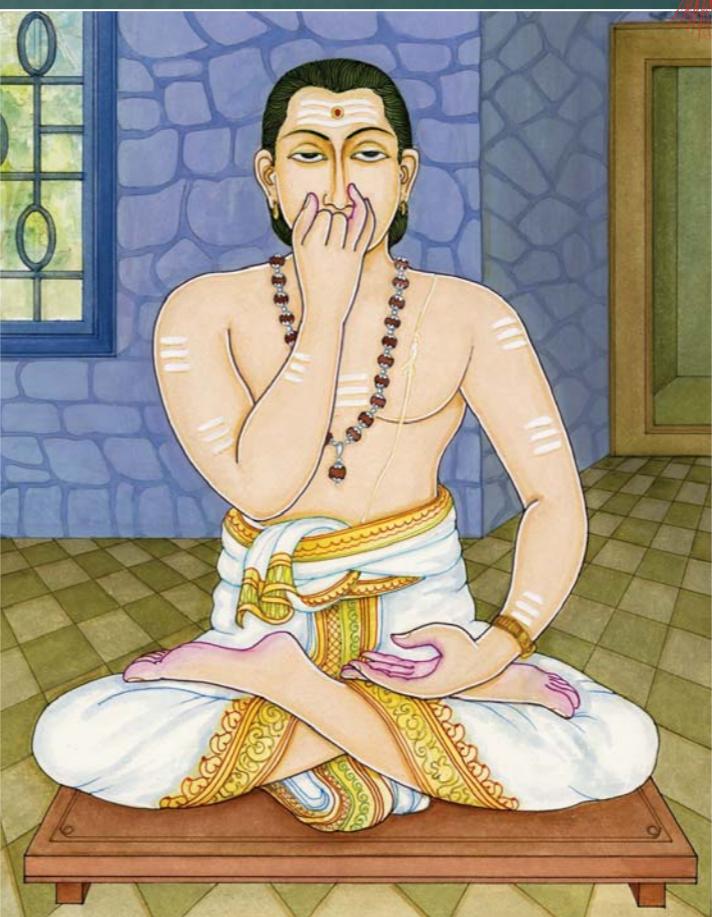
Shabda yoga, the yoga of sound, formulates the Supreme Reality as Shabda Brahman, or transcendent sound. This tradition goes back to the *Vedas*, where the entire universe is said to rest in a single, imperishable sound. Aspects of this teaching continue in all the different branches of yoga. The main insight behind the Yoga of Sound is that reality consists of vibration, which in essence is sound. Even the formless, silent Absolute has its own vibration, or shabda, but remains contained in itself, a kind of breathing without the breath, as it were. This sound of consciousness is called the "non-elemental sound," as distinguished from the elemental sound that arises through the ether element. By going back to the reality of Primal Sound, we can return to the very heart of creation and reach the Absolute, beyond time and space, from which all creation arises. We can reach the state of silence or pure stillness that is total communication and complete unity.

Vamadeva Shastri

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**Japa and the breath:** (Below) Counting repetitions, a devotee pushes successive beads over his third finger with his thumb; (right) during his morning sadhana, a man performs a basic pranayama, alternating inbreaths and outbreaths through each nostril



A. MANIVEL

### A Form of Meditation

Mantra is not only an important preparation for meditation, "mantra meditation" is one of the main types of meditation, with many variations. After all, our main mental fixation is with words. Mantra allows us to turn this negative attachment into a positive inspiration, as we replace our ordinary words and phrases with mantras.

Mantra practice gradually calms and integrates the mind. The mind becomes silent, concentrated and reflective, allowing our awareness to vibrate with the mantra. This naturally leads to deeper meditation, in which the mantra may fall away. Formless meditation is hard to achieve directly but becomes easily accessible once one builds the power of mantra in the mind. When we repeat a mantra, or do various forms of chanting, a more refined vibration develops and begins to assume the background pattern of our mind, down to a subconscious level. If we continually return to the mantra each time our mind becomes agitated, then the mantra's power to calm the mind will increase.

It should be beneath our dignity as a divine soul to allow our minds to dwell on negative thoughts and emotions, fears, desires, jealousy and hatred, or to be controlled and distracted by external influences. With the mantra, we have a tool for redirecting the energy of the mind within so that we can reclaim our inner composure. Mantra can help us break up deep-seated mental and emotional patterns, conditioning and traumas even from childhood.

Traditional yoga practice consists of two primary stages: 1) to develop *sattva guna*, or purity of body and mind; 2) to still the mind

and go beyond it to the higher Self, or Purusha.

The first stage of yoga requires promoting *sattva guna* to create the proper balance in the mind, removing toxins and *doshas* from the body, and neutralizing the residual energies of *rajas* and *tamas*, or agitation and inertia, from the subconscious. The second stage consists of going beyond the mind-body complex and all of its conditioning, even that of *sattva guna*, to pure awareness.

Generally we cannot succeed at the second step if we have not accomplished the first, which is its prerequisite. Many problems in yoga practice arise from attempting the second step when the first has not been accomplished (in some cases it may not have even been attempted!). People may try to meditate in stillness, or enter into the oneness, while their minds remain outwardly oriented and caught in the disturbances of the body and senses. The proper practice of mantra helps neutralize such difficulties, developing *sattva*, or harmony, in the deeper mental field.

If our minds are noisy, disturbed, hypersensitive, reactive, opinionated, critical, or just constantly busy, we cannot silence them. If we are addicted to sensory sources of stimulation and entertainment, we are not even in control of our mind and so cannot focus it in any consistent manner for meditation. First we must set in motion forces to take the mind from its disturbed (*rajasic*) or dull (*tamasic*) state to its natural, clear quality (*sattva*). Mantra is the main practice for changing

the nature of the mind from *tamas* and *rajas* to *sattva*. At the same time, it provides us the focus and energy for going beyond the mind.

### Use by Yogis

Mantra is probably the main practice that characterizes yoga as a whole and its many different branches. All yogic paths use mantras and have special mantras of their own. Special mantras and chants pervade the primary yogas of knowledge (jnana), devotion (bhakti) and service (karma) in which asana does not have an important role. Yet even in hatha yoga, where asana can be very important, mantra remains significant and is the main method employed to prepare the mind for deeper yoga practices.

The *Yoga Sutras* and its tradition of raja yoga emphasizes the role of the Pranava, which literally refers to "primal sound," and specifically to the mantra Aum, as the main means of connecting with the Divine or Cosmic Lord, Ishvara, the primordial guru of gurus in the yoga tradition. Just like the *Upanishads*, the *Yoga Sutras* stress the importance of chanting and meditating upon Aum, which is the essence of all mantras. This means that mantra is the guiding power of yoga, not just one of its many practices!

Bhakti yoga, the yoga of devotion, centers on chanting, singing and the internal repetition of divine names, like Namah Sivaya or the Hare Krishna mantra, as the best means of developing deep devotion and divine love. In fact, the word of the heart is always mantra!

Jnana yoga, the yoga of knowledge, focuses on prime Atmic, or Self-revealing, mantras like So'ham, "He am I," or the great sayings (*mahavakyas*) of Vedantic philosophy. Aum is also important as the

## MANTRA & PRANAYAMA

Pranayama [controlled breathing] and mantra naturally go together and work best in combination. Using a mantra along with pranayama unites the mind and prana, drawing our attention and awareness into the breathing process. It can turn pranayama into meditation, as well as bring energy, vitality and wakefulness into the repetition of the mantra. Uniting prana (our power of action) with the mind (our power of knowledge) integrates us back into the source of our being. Prana gives shakti to the mantra and makes it alive and vibrating within our entire body. The sound of the breath is our most natural and constant outer mantra, we could say. The sound of our heartbeat, which is connected to the sound of the breath, is our most natural internal mantra. An important goal of mantra practice is to get one's mantra to resonate with the breath, so that it is naturally repeated, strengthened and deepened along with every breath that we take—and then to get it to resonate with every heartbeat, so that our heartbeat is the beat of the mantra.

Vamadeva Shastri

sound of the Self. Such mantras are the foundation for the meditation and Self-inquiry practices that characterize jnana yoga practice.

Karma yoga involves an extensive performance of rituals, like pujas and yajnas, all of which have their accompanying mantras to empower and sanctify them. It includes various forms of service (seva) to others, which are best performed while repeating a mantra. Unless the mind is engaged inwardly in mantra, one may not be effectively practicing karma yoga even when performing service.

Hatha yoga and tantric yoga use pranic mantras, like Hum, to arouse the kundalini and open the chakras. The fifty main Sanskrit letters form the petals of the chakras and serve to energize them. The kundalini shakti, or inner power of yoga, is said to be composed of the letters or sounds of the Sanskrit alphabet and is primarily a higher mantric force. Kundalini is an electrical energy of speech at a deeper level of consciousness.

The practice of yoga usually begins with the chanting of mantras—which may be mantras to the guru, to the aspect of the Divine one worships, or to the higher self—in order to create the proper atmosphere for teaching, or mantras to sanctify the ground on which one sits. Mantra grants sanctity and concentration to yoga, which otherwise easily descends into another form of physical exercise or a seeking of personal empowerment.

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PERSONAL PRACTICE

# Character Matters

Swami Vivekananda emphasized the need to re-educate ourselves on how to acquire and keep that most cherished of personal qualities, good character

BY SWAMI ATMASHRADDHANANDA

**B**UILD YOUR CHARACTER!" A GOOD NUMBER OF people in today's world do not think this is good advice. To substantiate their stand, they cite the examples of a large number of people, morally bankrupt and without much of a genuine character, who are "doing well" in life. Such characterless people become their role models, and they think their own lives should be fashioned on these lines. "Why should I be playing a different tune when everyone else is dancing to the tune of dishonesty and hypocrisy?" They continue to indulge in this line of thinking until they face the consequences of absence of character or moral bankruptcy themselves.

Shaken up by those harsh facts, they become humble and begin to look for an answer. They soon learn, if they are sincere, that one cannot blame others for one's weakness. One must accept oneself and try to do better. Character building, hence, is a deeply personal and intimate issue. One cannot sit in a corner with his hands clasped and say, "How does my character matter?" Nor can one escape the consequences of lack of character building. Character matters in more than one way; and character building is the perpetual challenge confronting everyone, individually and collectively.

Spiritual life sans character building is like constructing a house without any mortar or cementing agent. Though all mystic traditions speak of moksha or spiritual liberation, a state beyond even the issue of character building, no one denies that character building alone is the guiding principle in all spiritual matters.

## What, really, is character?

Swami Vivekananda gave a most complete definition of character. He said, "Every work that we do, every movement of the body, every thought that we think, leaves such an impression on the mind-stuff, and even when such impressions are not obvious on the surface, they are sufficiently strong to work beneath the surface, subconsciously. What we are every moment is determined by the sum total of these impressions on the mind."

Swami went on, "What I am just at this moment is the effect of the sum total of all the impressions of my past life. This is really what is meant by character; each man's character is determined by the sum total of these impressions. If good impressions prevail, the character becomes good; if bad, it becomes bad. If a man continuously hears bad words, thinks bad thoughts, does bad actions, his mind will be full of bad impressions; and they will influence his thought and work

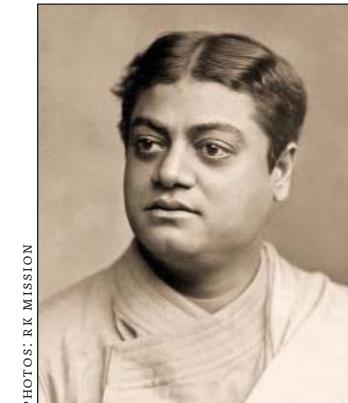


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without his being conscious of the fact.

"In fact, these bad impressions are always working, and their resultant must be evil, and that man will be a bad man; he cannot help it. The sum total of these impressions in him will create the strong motive power for doing bad actions. He will be like a machine in the hand of his impressions, and they will force him to do evil. Similarly, if a man thinks good thoughts and does good works, the sum total of these impressions will be good; and they, in a similar manner, will force him to do good even in spite of himself."

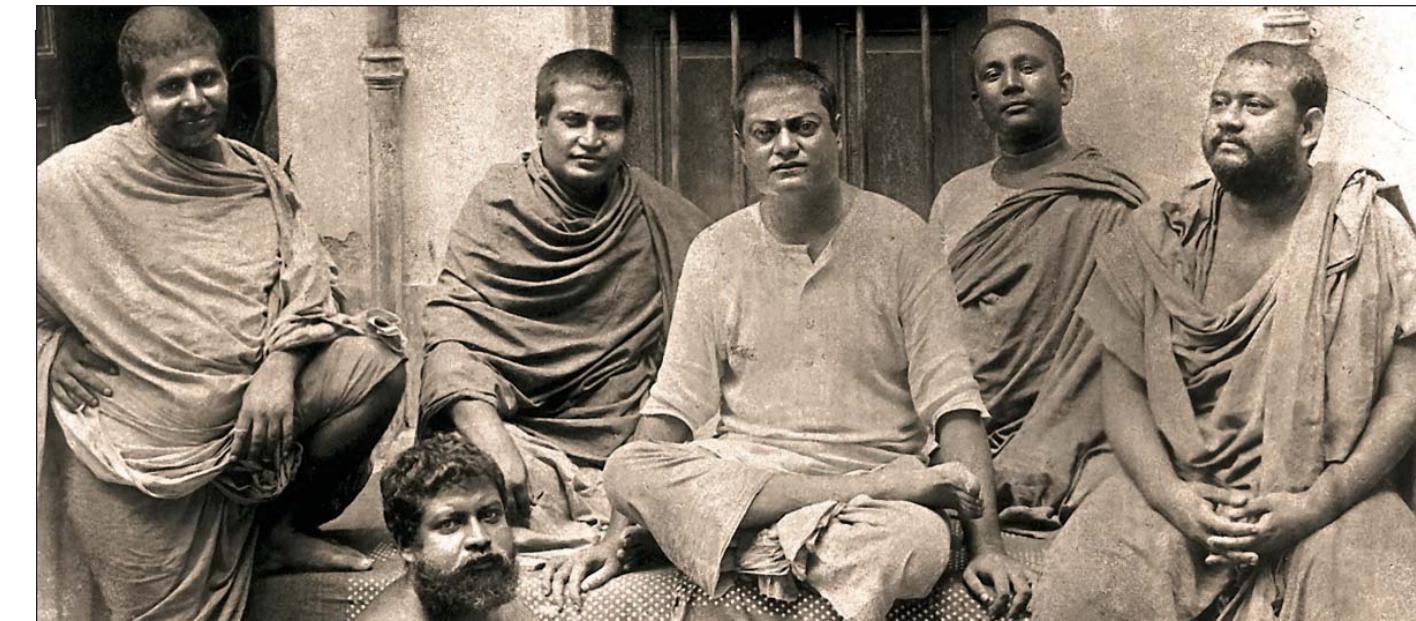
Repetition, or repeated thinking of a thought or happening of an action, creates what we call character. It is an outcome of experience, of thoughts and actions, of reactions and responses—of life itself. In Swamiji's insightful words: "Karma in its effect on character is the most tremendous power that man has to deal with. Man, as it were, is a center, and is attracting all the powers of the universe towards himself. Good and bad, misery and happiness, all are running towards him and clinging round him, and out of them he fashions the mighty stream of tendencies called character and throws it outwards." This means that character is the result of whatever we do and do not do (for not doing is also a kind of action).

## Can we alter our nature?

Is character inherited, or is it subject to change? Can one change one's character? This is an important issue that bothers most human minds. Understanding it is essential to the whole process of character building. According to Swamiji, the birth of a person does have a role to play. He said once, "One child is born of a divine nature, another of a human, others of lower character."

While parentage and the formative period of one's life cast an influence on one's character, every human being has an opportunity to change himself. He can make a choice to change himself. If it were not so, all spiritual counsels would be meaningless, all scriptures would turn ineffective and man will remain condemned forever. If past actions have played a role in making our present character, it naturally follows that our future character will be determined by what we do now.

Swamiji explains: "Look back on yourselves from the state of the amoeba to the human being; who made all that? Your own will. Can you deny then that it is almighty? That which has made you come up so high can make you go higher still. What you want is character, strengthening of the will."



**Creating men of character:** Swami Vivekananda (left and above center) developed such strong character in the founding monks of the Ramakrishna Mission that the institution is going strong a hundred years later.

Training the will means training or controlling the senses and the mind and not being controlled by them. *Kathopanishad* speaks of the human personality as a chariot: "Know the atman to be the master of the chariot; the body, the chariot; the buddhi (discriminating faculty), the charioteer; and the mind, the reins. The senses, they say, are the horses; the object, the roads. A man who has discrimination for his charioteer, and holds the reins of the mind firmly, reaches the end of the road; and that is the supreme position of Vishnu (the all-pervading consciousness)."

The whole process of character building lies with our thoughts, or to be more precise, with our willpower. It is the will which needs to be trained. To this end, one should become the master of the chariot, instead of becoming a slave to the horses (the senses) and the reins (the mind or thoughts). This is an inner training wherein the charioteer (buddhi) has to learn to control the mind and senses, and not be controlled by them. Said Swamiji: "He who has succeeded in attaching or detaching his mind to or from the centers at will has succeeded in *pratyahara*, which means, 'gathering towards,' checking the outgoing powers of the mind, freeing it from the thrall of the senses. When we can do this, we shall really possess character."

## Self-control

Let us next look at character building from the viewpoint of spiritual life, where meditation plays a central role. Meditation depends upon concentration, and concentration depends upon withdrawal of the mind, which, again, depends upon self-control. Self-control, which signifies mastery over the mind and the senses, is therefore the secret of all success in meditation, and also of mastering the character-building process.

Self-control is a way of life. It is based on exercising and strengthening one's will on the right lines. One has to learn to control one's cravings and channel them in healthier means of expression. Chastity, truthfulness and genuine sympathy are the three indispensable components of a true character.

The approach to character building should be always positive. One should emphasize one's nurturing positive virtues rather than getting rid of vices. A widespread trend these days is to emphasize the importance of overcoming addiction to alcohol, drugs or other compulsive habits. This focus emphasizes their harmful effects but fails to emphasize what one should do in place of such habits. The result is that people keep attending camps or seminars and continue with their wrong habits.

Nor should one confuse character with talents. By talent is meant some special trait or capacity to do something, such as singing, writing or public speaking. One should not forget that while we admire

talent, it is character that we really respect. Talent may bring us some fame and reputation, but it is character which is the real man.

Swami Vivekananda rightly pointed out: "If you really want to judge the character of a man, look not at his great performances. Every fool may become a hero at one time or another. Watch a man do his most common actions; those are indeed the things which will tell you the real character of a great man. Great occasions rouse even the lowest of human beings to some kind of greatness, but he alone is the really great man whose character is great always, the same wherever he be."

## The company one keeps matters

One of the greatest helps in character building is to associate with men of character. If one is fortunate enough to find such company, one finds subtle changes taking place in one's own character. Company has a profound impact on the type of character one develops. More than what we are asked to do, it is the example of our associates and role models that affects us most.

But sometimes we are not so fortunate. In that case, reading and deep thinking over the lives and teachings of men of character is of much help. One should fill one's mental atmosphere with holy and inspiring thoughts. Since we become what we admire, we should choose our objects of admiration and adoration with care.

To conclude, character building is the way to spiritual growth and is also the fruit of all spiritual realization. It is foundation of true education also. To restrict education to acquisition of knowledge (or mere degrees, as is often the case) is to not get educated at all. One may lack academic knowledge, but if he has trained his will, purified and controlled his mind, he is then truly educated. He alone is able to live a true life and contribute to it meaningfully. Training of will should be the ultimate goal of all education.

Be it in secular matters or spiritual matters, building a noble and pure character is the only lasting solution to life's problems. Character is not built only in the silence of meditation (though meditation is of great help) but in the broad daylight of right action.

**SWAMI ATMASHRADDHANANDA** is a monk of the Ramakrishna Order and editor of *The Vedanta Kesari* ([chennaimath.org](http://chennaimath.org)), from which this article was excerpted.

# Meet the US Army's First Hindu Chaplain

Six years into her service, Captain Pratima Dharm has found her life's calling: ministering to the men and women of the American military

BY LAVINA MELWANI, NEW YORK

**S**HE'S A CAPTAIN IN THE ARMY WHO has served in the combat zones of northern Iraq and been awarded several honors, including the Bronze Star. But she doesn't carry a gun and has never fired a shot. She says simply, "My defense is God." Meet Pratima Dharm, 45, the first-ever Hindu chaplain in the US military, now in her sixth year of service. Pratima goes where the soldiers go, offering spiritual guidance and strength to all, regardless of their individual faith. She is currently posted at Walter Reed Medical Center in Washington, D. C., working with wounded soldiers.

"Hindu Chaplain" may sound unusual to an Indian-American, but the concept is far from unknown in the Hindu world. India's military has religious teachers assigned to every unit, and there are Hindu, Sikh and Christian places of worship on every base (see *HINDUISM TODAY*, July, 2005).

Hindu chaplains also serve in the armies of the UK, South Africa, Indonesia and Nepal. Chaplains, or similar designations, have been a part of armies since ancient times. Military chaplains are noncombatant religious teachers, advisors and priests who in modern times minister to soldiers of all faiths, as the occasion requires. Chaplains go through standard army training, except for weapons. There the soldiers take over; and Dharm says they are very, very protective of her.

Chaplain Dharm grew up in the cosmopolitan cities of modern India, in landscapes dotted with temples, churches, gurudwaras and mosques. As a child in Patna and Bombay, she encountered many different communities peacefully living together. Her early education was at Notre Dame Academy, a Catholic school; later she studied at Mithibai College and Shri Nathibai Damodar Thackeray Women's University.

She retains fond memories of celebrating Hindu, Muslim and Christian festivals with friends and neighbors. "In India there is barely anything that is not religious or spiritual," she says. "I mean, even the most common person over there—such as someone selling tea and sweets on the street—can talk to you so spiritually. Everything around us was spiritual. Both my parents were very open to other religions and did not believe that Hinduism is the only way. Of course, we were raised as Hindus, but never did I hear



a conversation at home, even when I was a young child, that was against any religion. My parents would always encourage me to ask questions about God, and find God for myself through family discussions."

"From early on," she explains, "I would love to fast on Janmashtami; and the way I was talked to about Lord Krishna, by my mom especially, He seemed like a person to me. It was not somebody far away, you know, not a distant God, but somebody very personal, a personal friend, somebody who would listen to you, somebody that you could go to for anything."

"In our home," she recalls, "there was a big tradition about making every festival colorful and meaningful, through food, through different activities, through connections and community relationships. It was not uncommon for 200 people to come to our home over a period of several days during the festivals of Janmashtami, Diwali, Holi or Durga Puja."

So, in moving from India to the US, how did Dharm get attracted to the unusual field of chaplaincy? "I have a master's in psychology, and I was drawn to God since I was a child. When I got an opportunity to study theology

**In service of God and country:** (left to right) Captain Pratima Dharm in her official army photo; her husband and two daughters with grandma; Pratima and daughters



COURTESY PRATIMA DHARM

in this country, I pursued it. Chaplaincy was the only field I found where you could integrate theology and psychology."

In our Hindu traditions, she points out, the emphasis is on understanding the self, and psychology also emphasizes the study of the individual. She believes that the *Bhagavad Gita*, the teachings of Sri Krishna, can be applied to our daily lives in powerful ways. "How does one go through grief, how does one go through anxiety? As we read Krishna's teachings and we understand it, it gives us a lot of courage to go through life and get self-knowledge."

"So once I understand who I am, what makes me happy, what makes me sad, I allow that to the other person, to my patients or my soldiers that I come across in my ministry. Their story perhaps may be different than mine, but the basic principles are the same, so it's about allowing the other person space to process their own story, and offering them understanding, offering them care."

Though people are of different faiths, Dharm is able to distill the commonality, the core that connects, because of her grounding in Vedanta. She explains, "I have to give them what I have, but I also have to have the ability in me to accept what they have. It is an exchange. And sometimes I may not be able to give something to the person or may give little, but the main thing is I am open to that. The chaplaincy is a deeply pluralistic environment for the study of the relationship between person and God, between persons, and the relationship between cultures. In that pluralistic environment, one has to be open."

While working at Walter Reed Medical Hospital, Dharm finally found a Hindu institution authorized by the military to endorse someone for the chaplaincy: Chinmaya Mission West, the first Hindu organization to receive recognition as an endorsing agency by the Pentagon. To obtain this recognition, Chinmaya Mission worked with Chaturbhuj Gidwani, an Indian-American army reserve veteran and long-time advocate for a Hindu chaplaincy. Dharm took the Chin-

maya courses and passed the examinations. Upon learning of her appointment, Gidwani said, "The Hindu community around the world received the news of the appointment of Chaplain Pratima Dharm as an auspicious event in the Chaplaincy Corps."

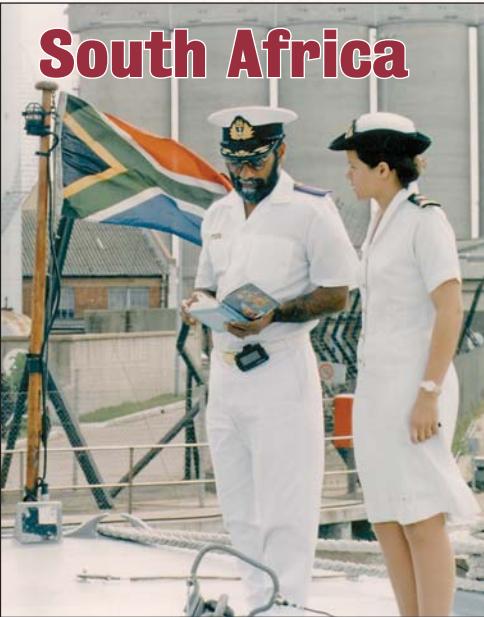
Dharm does not say much about her move to Hinduism from the Pentecostal Church, or what the Pentecostals thought about it. But the Army allowed the change, and she leaves no doubt that she is, and always has been, a Hindu.

## The Work of a Chaplain

Having their own chaplain is something new and wonderful for the approximately 1,000 Hindus in the American Armed Forces, for they now have someone who is competent to address their spiritual needs. Practically speaking, however, these 1,000 Hindus (most of them doctors) are spread around the military, and around the world. Dharm's day consists of visiting the soldiers, marines and sailors of Walter Reed. Like all military chaplains, she ministers to every faith. She finds that soldiers have many issues, especially those who are coping with injuries. "There is an excruciating amount of pain that a wounded soldier goes through, especially in the first three or four months of the healing process," she reports. "We have many soldiers who are amputees, and some of them have returned really scarred from war. My daily duty is being with them, understanding them, processing what is going on with them, and making sure that they are getting the best care possible."



## India



## South Africa



## UK



## USA

**In good company:** (left to right) New Indian army unit recruits salute Hindu (in lead), Muslim and Sikh priests at their swearing-in ceremony; Vipra Kiriti Pillay (left) appointed in 1996 full-time Hindu chaplain in the South African National Defense Force; a 2009 meeting of British chaplains and Hindu soldiers organized by UK Armed Forces Chaplain Lieutenant Colonel Acharya Krishan Kant Attri; US Army Captain Pratima Dharm

Dharm's psychology training has proven invaluable, as her chaplaincy tasks extend far beyond spiritual matters to encompass everything that is relevant to a soldier's life, including suicide prevention and combat stress training. She provides marriage workshops and marital counseling as needed. She must function as peacemaker between physicians and patients, sounding board for families, caretaker of the psychological moods and spiritual needs of the patients. As a staff officer, she is also assigned other projects, unrelated to her chaplain work.

While ministering to all faiths, Dharm also provides specific religious support related to Hinduism. She holds yoga classes and Hindu worship services for soldiers and officers. At Janmashtami she held a special prayer service at the hospital, with images of Radha-Krishna and Ganesh. She says the Hindus were overjoyed, happy to the point of tears: they had never seen a Hindu service in the area where they worked. She says, "So it is a start, it is a beginning. I am sure that there have been other beginnings in the past, but I opened it in a way that others can also participate, people of other religions who are interested in joining and attending this program."

Dharm emphasizes that she is not a Hindu priest and therefore does not perform samskaras such as the birth of a child, marriages or death rites for the Hindu soldiers, but generally conducts the worship services and festival celebrations. This is a limitation of Dharm's particular background, and not one

of the chaplaincy. A Hindu chaplain with the requisite training could perform any of the rites and rituals done by a Hindu priest, including the samskaras.

What would she do if a soldier is dying and asked for the last rites? "Whatever situation they are in, and especially when they are passing away, that is the most sacred moment for those who are around the soldiers," she says. "Everyone in the military knows that that is the one moment where everything stops, when there is a soldier dying. And if that is the desire of the soldier, I would be more than honored, more than willing to do it."

### Challenges of Chaplaincy

Asked about her biggest challenge as a military chaplain, she cites the stereotypes that exist about Hinduism amongst the mainstream. "I think, as Indians, we have done very well, as we have come out of India and established ourselves in businesses and professional fields. But as far as explaining our religion is concerned, we have not done it well. Indians have established temples, and they found a life within the temple, but you know they have kept their professional life and personal life sort of separate."

While she feels the Indian community has tried to do its best, the task is a monumental one. For her the biggest challenge lies in educating the people about Hinduism.

She remembers her childhood upbringing where there was so much common ground

among friends of different faiths. Differences were discussed with interest, respect, love and caring. "The bottom line, I believe, is that all religions connect in more ways than we realize or want to give credit to. We have more similarities with each other than dissimilarities; and even with dissimilarities, I would say it is an approach, it is the difference in the way we approach God."

She does come across some soldiers who are not open to having a chaplain not of their faith. She says, "The important part of being a chaplain is that you let others say what they want to say. I have to be comfortable in my faith and allow that person to be comfortable in theirs; but there is always that element of where is the discomfort in a person, and, as a spiritual doctor or as a chaplain, I look at those areas."

### Her Kurdistan Experience

Dharm won the Bronze Star for managing ten humanitarian aid missions in Iraq for the Iraqi people, especially the Kurdish population. These are among her strongest memories of Iraq.

In particular she remembers her visit to an ancient Roman Catholic church with over 10,000 members. It had been there since the time of Jesus, and the language used is still Aramaic. She conducted several missions, collecting and donating funds, clothing and personal care items to the congregation. The priest invited her to preach—an intimidating task for a woman in a Kurdish neighborhood where women rarely speak in public. As a gesture of respect she covered her head and asked her female soldiers to do the same.

This is a new duty of chaplains: religious outreach to the local community in war zones. During the Bosnian war, in the 1990s, the US military realized the benefit of inter-

acting with religious leaders and congregations and saw that the chaplains, with their strong interfaith training, were uniquely qualified for this task.

Dharma recalls her trepidation at the priest's invitation. "I prayed to God because it was totally a surprise. I preached for 45 minutes on a Biblical passage they gave. When I was done, the people were clapping. They were just stunned. The priest told me I was the first female to preach from that podium. It was a miraculous thing, only God could make that happen for me."

She adds, "God is so real to me and has taken me through the dangers in Iraq and brought me back safe, kept my children safe, given me a good marriage, good life, good job. I am very grateful to Him."

### Balancing Family Life

As a woman chaplain in the US army, Dharm has been a path-breaker in more ways than one. She has often had to put her professional duties before her personal relationships as a woman, wife and mother. She was deployed to Iraq just four and a half months after delivering her second child.

"It was difficult, because I am a very strong mother," she acknowledges. "I kept a stone on my heart, and I went to Iraq. I feel that what I am doing is as an example to my daughters. I have two daughters, and it is alright for Mom to follow her calling. My husband is extremely supportive; he has stepped in so many times, and I also have stepped in for him." Dharm's mother has also played a major role, moving in with the family as needed.

Asked if it is difficult being a woman in the army, Dharm gives high marks to the American culture and to the military, which has a large and prominent female population and is hence pro-women. She recalls that in

Iraq many of the local Muslim population were surprised to meet a female officer who was always surrounded by men.

### Chaplaincy as a Career Choice

Having reached the rank of captain, would she recommend chaplaincy as a viable career to other Hindus? "Absolutely, it is a very, very rewarding career. I think I would call it more than a career—it is a vocation," she replied. "I would encourage people who truly are passionate to become religious and cultural ambassadors through the military."

She warns, however, that this is not an ordinary 9-to-5 job, but a rewarding interaction with long hours where you meet and nurture many different people, helping to bring peace and solace into their lives.

Chaplaincy, she explains, is about feeling God has chosen this path for you. "It has to be done out of deep commitment, and not just because you want to join the military. You will be tried and tested over and over again. It is difficult and challenging. It isn't like becoming an engineer or a doctor. Being a chaplain for me is a calling from God."

"If that first criterion is met, then being a chaplain can be a suitable life career. It is a government job where if you serve for a minimum of 20 years, you retire with 50 percent of your salary for the rest of your life."

"The pay scale is quite good. While you are in the army, housing is free, and there is a food allowance. There are a lot of medical and educational benefits, and retirees who want to study will get these allowances, too. There is a family separation allowance that is given to soldiers on duty. Those who are serving in a dangerous environment are given a certain amount of money every month. To all this, add the prime benefit of serving one's country and protecting the Constitu-

tion and the rights of all citizens."

### Final Thoughts

"The best thing is that, wherever I go, I am still an Indian," she shared with a smile, full of pride. "I am a US citizen, but who I am is Indian. My roots are Indian. I take that as an opportunity to take myself, my culture and my religion and dialog with others and to understand their culture and religion, because that is just as sacred as mine is to me."

After retirement, Dharm plans to continue religious work. "Wherever I am, even if I am just planting a garden, or if I am just cooking a meal for my family, my goal in life is to serve Him. Whether I am in the military or not, even when I am just doing simple things, I know He is there. I will continue to do that even when I retire."

Asked for any parting words of wisdom, she offered these observations and advice: "I think for many Hindus living abroad there is an element of shame about their faith. One of the reasons I came forward and said I want to be a Hindu chaplain is that I do not myself have any shame about being Hindu or about following my traditions. Even in India, I see a lot of Indians who are not at all following any of their traditions; they follow whatever is the 'in thing' to do. Wherever we are, we should have *atma swabhiman*—respect for self and what we have come from, and the courage to not give in to the next 'in thing.'

"I would encourage every Hindu to be proud to be Hindu. No matter whether they are in the Maldives or in the West Indies, or they are in Madagascar, or they are in India, we Hindus have gone all over because of our history. Be proud of it and continue with your traditions—they are beautiful, those traditions—and try to pass them down to your children."

# Rejoice in Deities' Diversity

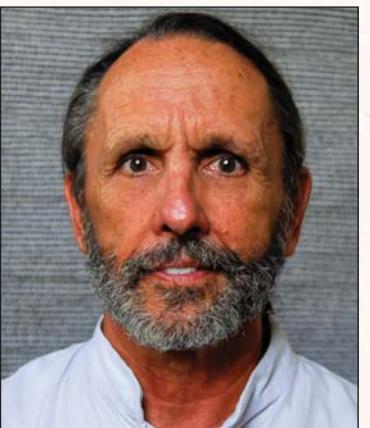
Hindus don't need to remold our theology to fit an Abrahamic monotheistic model. The concept of one God and many Gods are not mutually exclusive.

BY RAMDAS LAMB

**T**ODAY, THE MOST POPULAR THEOLOGICAL beliefs in the West are monotheism (the belief in a single all-powerful Divinity) and atheism (the belief that there is no divine entity). The Abrahamic religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam preach the former, while those who base their worldview exclusively on material or scientific rationality tend to adhere to the latter. Yet, in much of the rest of the world, polytheism, or a belief in multiple Divinities, has been a long held and popular conviction. Atheists and Western monotheists together denigrate polytheists and their beliefs as either ignorant or pagan. The more conservative monotheists even equate them with evil and demonism. Such narrow-minded views and biases have hampered many who adhere to Western thinking from understanding the value and validity of polytheistic beliefs for the people who hold them. Especially in contemporary times, religious narrow-mindedness is a prevalent and major cause of much of the violence and hatred in the world, and both Western monotheistic and atheistic thinking have been major contributors. The purpose here is to make the case for the inclusion of polytheism as a legitimate belief system, for it has animated people throughout the world since ancient times and has often provided an understanding of Divinity and reality that is more rational than Abrahamic monotheism and has been the cause of far less violence in the world. Hinduism will be used as a primary example, since it offers a model for blending polytheism with its special form of monotheism into a useful and practical theology.

No human has demonstrable or irrefutable proof of the existence in a Divinity or a lack thereof. All theories regarding the Divine are based on faith, supposition and individual experience. That being the case, we should focus instead on the ramifications and practical usefulness of the various theological conceptualizations on the people who hold them as well as on the rest of the world. Among the most ancient of these concepts is polytheism.

*Polytheism* (from the Greek *polutheos*, "many Gods") denotes a theological system involving a belief in and worship of multiple Divinities. The term was first popularized in the writings of eighteenth century European ethnographers as they encountered, then sought to identify and label, the religious beliefs of "primitive" peoples they studied. *Polytheism* was used to contrast these beliefs with Judeo-Christian monotheism. Nowadays, the term is essentially used to refer to any belief system in which multiple spirit beings are worshiped. These may include Gods, Goddesses, semi-divine beings, good or evil spirits, or the spirits of departed ancestors. Depending



## Polytheism and monotheism coexist like the parts of a wheel.

upon the tradition, there may be an established and recognized hierarchy of worshiped beings, or they may be seen to act independently. They may work in conjunction with one another or at cross purposes.

There are several significant characteristics typically found in nearly all polytheistic traditions. Among these are a belief that each Divinity or spirit being has a specific function (such as healing, protection in travel, etc.), that it controls a particular realm (such as a spirit realm or a specific location in the physical world), or that it possesses a specific power or range of powers. The latter can include forces of nature, such as rain, thunder, a celestial body, the seasons, or may involve dominion over characteristics of human personality, like love, devotion, compassion, jealousy, revenge and so forth. Another common belief is that spirits possess or adopt a specific form, often human-like, and are endowed with human-like characteristics, such as love and compassion, but also jealousy and revenge. Other forms that spirits may embody include those of animals, of aspects of nature like a volcano, or a combination of several, thus making reverence toward and worship of both human-like and non-anthropomorphic forms commonplace.

Finally, singular devotion to one specific Divinity is not necessary. Simultaneous propitiation of several Deities tends to be common and accepted. In some cases, this is seen as practical and necessary, since different spirits control different realms or powers.

Reflecting on how this approach can be understood on a human level, it parallels in many ways the functioning of democratic society, in which power exists in the hands of various individuals who can be approached in turn or simultaneously for assistance. In conceptualizing such a theology, then, the adherents obviously drew upon their own human experiences. In the Jewish creation story, the Gods (*elohim*) say, "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness." What may be more accurate is that humans create the Gods in their image and likeness, believing that what happens on Earth must be a reflection of what happens in the heavens.

Polytheism, then, often mirrors the human experience of family, village and state. It is frequently found in cultures with a clearly stratified social and/or political hierarchy, where power is held in the hands of different individuals based on their position within the hierarchy, and that these powers are there to benefit those who approach the various Divinities seeking assistance. Different Divinities, like different bureaucrats, have different powers. One then approaches and propitiates the being with the requisite power to fulfill

his or her needs or desires. Additionally, one can choose to focus exclusively on a Divinity who appeals to one's own personality. Alternatively, one can choose to ignore all Deities. While such individuals are then believed to not receive divine assistance, they are typically not understood to be punished for this choice. Thus, in many ways polytheism is a pragmatic theological view that, as mentioned above, reflects aspects of a democratic style system.

If, on the other hand, one looks at the monotheistic concept in which there is a solitary omnipotent Divinity, we find a very different approach to the Divine and also to the likely world experience of those who formulated it. In monotheism, especially as expressed in the Abrahamic religions, ultimate power is in the hands of a single male Divinity. He is all knowing, all powerful and ever present. As with the Gods in polytheistic traditions, he has human personality traits. Unlike what is found in most polytheistic traditions, he demands allegiance and punishes those who do not worship him exclusively. On the human level, one typically finds such a being in monarchies, dictatorships and societies run by a ruling tribal leader or warlord, like those currently found in many Middle Eastern countries. While such systems may be comforting to those who belong to the right tribe or belief system, a solitary all-powerful ruler is a threat to those who do not. The vast majority of individuals in such societies remain weak and powerless unless they observe strict adherence to the being in power and do whatever they are told. This is seen as the only means of survival.

In Hinduism, polytheism and monotheism coexist in a relationship much like the parts of a wheel. The many Deities are like the spokes, all of which emanate from the hub with each playing an important role. The more common of these Deities to be propitiated by rural agriculturalists Bhudevi (Mother Earth), Surya (the Sun God), Ganesh (Lord of Auspiciousness and Success), regional Deities, and various river Goddesses. Among the myriad of others who receive attention and reverence are Lakshmi (Goddess of Wealth), Sarasvati (Goddess of Knowledge and Learning) and Hanuman (Devotion Incarnate), to name just a few. Countless Deities are regularly propitiated, often together.

Then, there is the Hindu form of monotheism, in which the Divine is formally referred to as Brahman (not brahmin, the priestly caste). It is said to be the source, the hub, from which all Deities are manifest. It transcends all attempts at defining or qualifying it. It is not male or female, has no form or description. It takes on apparent form or characteristics solely to allow humans the ability to relate to it. In that state, it may be called Ram, Krishna, Shiva, Devi, etc. All these names thus refer to a Qualified Absolute that is simultaneously beyond qualifications. For Hindus, this makes total sense. With characteristics, the Divine can love, protect and show compassion; beyond qualifications, it is all-encompassing. It is not only the source and reality of all other Deities, but also of all creation, both animate and inanimate. Because of this all-encompassing nature, it is the One to whom all prayers are offered. This is why it is commonplace for Hindus to be seen in Buddhist or Jain temples, in Sikh gurudwaras, and in mosques and churches. The Deity worshiped in each is seen by Hindus to simply be a different manifestation of the Deity they already worship.

In the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, an important Hindu sacred text, a man asks a great teacher, "How many Gods are there?" To this he is told, "Three thousand and three." When he questions this



**Lord Murugan:** One of the many Gods of Hinduism, also known as Lord Subrahmanya or Karttikeya, He is a God of righteousness and spiritual striving

answer, he receives the reply, "There are thirty-three Gods." He asks again and is told, "There are six." Not satisfied, he continues to ask and gets the response, "There are only three Gods." Again he asks and is told, "One and a half Gods." After one final query, the teacher says to him, "There is one God." In the explanation that follows, the teacher tells him that the many are all ultimately manifestations of the one indwelling presence. In the process, he alludes to a concept found in various *Upanishads* that equates the unchanging reality that exists in each individual with the Supreme, Changeless Divinity. In Sanskrit, this concept is "Tat tvam asi," which can be translated as "You are that" or "That you are."

The merging of polytheistic and monotheistic concepts in this way is unique to Hinduism. It allows people to believe in and pray to their own conceptualizations of the Divine in whatever form they choose, while at the same time elevating all of them to their ultimate reality, which is the singular omnipotent, omnipresent and omniscient Divinity, who demands no allegiance, punishes no one for lack of belief, yet provides wisdom, comfort, compassion and freedom to those who seek it. All they need to do is look within.

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# Mom's Hands-on Sari Lessons

"In a ritual passed from mother to daughter, I, too, underwent the awesome training that is required to tie one's own sari in stylish fashion"

BY PRIYANKA SRINIVASA

MY MOTHER UNFOLDED THE SILK AND PULLED IT ABOVE ME. As cloth slipped around my shoulders, her hands pleated swiftly. Fabric fans tumbled from her fingertips, and she tucked them into my waist. "Let it flow, don't forget to walk with your back straight," my mother whispered, safety pins clenched between her teeth. I held my neck high as she draped a jeweled corner across my chest as my sister watched in silence. Done. The ritual was complete. I stood before the mirror, admiring her work.

Whenever I ask my mother why she came to the US with my father in 1989, she replies by saying, "It was those movies. Stories of strong sultry women in furs and clinging to wine glasses was what I wanted. I was young. America was adventure." And so she flew over the great green ocean with the ambition that her husband would make it big. But immigration was more complex than my mother anticipated. First, my parents had to decide where they would live. Most Indians migrated to urban areas on the East and West coasts. My parents decided on Pittsburgh, with its strong Hindu population and large Venkateswara Hindu temple. That Indian-American micro-culture helped my parents raise me, not only as an American, but as a proud desi, or Indian-American youth. Even though we second-generation Indians live in an American society, prescribed gender roles have been passed down to us. As an Indian-American girl, my mother initiated me in female-ascribed ceremonies that were secrets themselves, rituals that bonded those in one micro-culture into another micro-culture.

## The Meaning of the Sari

One ritual in particular, the most intimate of them all, is the sari-tying ceremony. It was performed at least each week as my mother and I prepared for the temple. This commonplace act of dressing is steeped in an array of issues: gender specification, sexuality, coming of age and the continuation of an ancient tradition. This piece of cloth is more than what meets the eye: like threads woven together, the sari stretches across the ocean from India to America. Strings intertwining the old and the new. From the moment you lift the sari over your head, the story of the sari surrounds you.

The sari is six yards long of cotton or silk fabric. When I unfold the fabric on the ground, I am always astounded at the simplicity of the cloth, because when woven around the body, it hangs so elaborately. It is wrapped, folded and tucked around the body over a cropped blouse. The sari, or something close to it, has been a symbol of womanhood in Hindu society since the Indus River civilization, more than 4,000 years. Close to the same design that was worn in the ancient civilization has been passed down generation after generation.

Growing up, I used to watch my mother tie her sari, thinking that it was the most beautiful dress in the whole world. Her upper



back was exposed and the dramatic drapes gave her such an elegant stance. This ethnic dress is sensual yet practical. It is so well fastened that it will never fall, yet when women walk; the folds make them look graceful and fragile. The cloth is shroud of something more. The sari is a tableau for the complex identity of Indian women.

There are several styles of saris—from simple cotton to diamond-studded silk. Even conventional cloth is elegant because of the many different styles of saris. My mother has hundreds of saris; some of them are in traditional colors: red and white, the colors of the holy days. Some of the saris are rich jewel-tones: garnet, emerald, amethyst, sapphire. Some are strong pastels like soft corals, robin-egg blue and sea-foam green. Each sari is different from the other. Each sari tells a story of weddings, holy days, birthdays, births and sometimes death.

## The Ritual of Sari Tying

On one Saturday, my family and I were planning to attend a classical Indian dance performance fund raiser. My sister and I were expected to wear saris because it was a cultural event. As usual, my mother would do the tying. It's all about patience, and a ritual that my sister's and my body had gotten used to. For a novice sari wearer, it is so difficult to tie the sari for herself. It takes a lot of opening of safety pins, holding cloth, spinning it into little fans to tuck along the waistline. So as my mother spins the cloth around each of us, she tells us stories about India and her family, weaving tales about married cousins and sleepy village days where young girls in saris pick jasmines in desert gardens after classes.

I once asked my mother why she dresses in saris. She replied by saying: "Indian women were born to please Indian men. I dress the part." Whenever I open old wedding albums of the women in my family, I notice the lines of young women draped in sequined cloth. They look so elegant in their dresses. They look like little dolls lined in rows by their husbands. The sari turns the girl into a woman. On my first day of college, my mother gave me a photo of herself on her wedding day. She was barely twenty-one, but she looked strong, confident, cool and ready for marriage. The sari is a symbol of womanhood. It was her uniform of marriage. The sari was a mark of pride for my mother. Whenever she pulls out her wedding sari, her face flushes with emotion. She excitedly stretches the cloth over her chest and insists I run my hands along the silk. "The cloth is so fine that you could pull it through my engagement ring," she gushes hurriedly. How could a piece of cloth mean so much to someone? This is the beauty of the sari: it is woven with the secret story of Indian women.

## What the Sari Means to Me

In the United States, the sari is not worn every day as my mother did in her youth. My sister and I wear them during religious and cultural events at our temple. We feel the same pride my mother feels when she wears hers. We feel pride because we know that we are keeping our traditions up and protecting an ancestral tradition. For my high school graduation, girls had to wear white dresses. I chose to wear my grandmother's white sari because it defined who I am. The

**Folding and tucking with style:** (opposite page), Priyanka dressed in her grandmother's white sari for her high school graduation; (above) just a few of the many steps are demonstrated by Priyanka's mother for the camera in the hallway of their home

sari is the mark of my history: my mother's struggle of adjusting to America, my grandmother's struggle of marrying at the age of ten. The sari to me is a symbol of strength. My mother was so thrilled when I decided to wear that sari, because I was demonstrating what I stood for at a right-of-passage ceremony. I was able to wear what I believed in and pay tribute to my culture.

When we go to community events, wearing a sari gives us an impression that we have Indian pride. We are demonstrating to other Indian families that we are grounded in our culture. To my mother and Indian women, presentation is everything. Personal grooming and neatness bring luck to the family. The sari is a physical emblem of etiquette training for girls. When you wear a sari, you must do so with ease, grace, poise and elegance. When you wear a sari, you become an instant lady. Women bring joy, luck and pride to a family. The more poised the woman, the more refined the family. I learned quite quickly to walk with tiny steps and to hold my head high so that my family will be proud of me, and my family would have a high stature here in America among the Indian-American families.

The sari is not a piece of cloth. It is the story I have inherited from my mother and her mother and her mother now wrapped around me—regardless of my parents' decision to travel across the ocean to "Amreeka" for economic security. Due to globalization, Indian women are torn between old Eastern traditions and Western, autonomous lifestyles. The tying of a sari is a secret communal act that is shared between different generations. The tying of saris is a forum for women to come together and share gossip, stories and advice. The reason why Indian women make sure their saris are tied in a proper fashion and dress to perfection is because their looks and demeanor are a reflection on their husbands and families. The sari, since it is a traditional apparel, brings pride that is twofold: feeling joy that you find yourself looking beautiful, and knowing that other women acknowledge the beauty of your sari folds. The sari is a tradition that is passed on from woman to woman. Those who are born and raised in the United States feel a pull to wear the sari because it is a recognizable symbol of Indian pride.

As my mother adjusts the fabric, I look into the mirror and watch the pleats roll off my shoulder, I cannot help but smile. I hold my neck up high, just like my mother told me to. And her mother told her. And her mother told her. We women are woven together like the golden threads of the sari.

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TEMPLES

## Kerala Temple's Wealth Astounds India

Court case alleging mismanagement of assets leads to opening of old vaults containing what appears to be billions of dollars worth of gold and jewels

By CHOOIDE SHIVARAM, BENGALURU  
IN JULY 2011, THE SREE ANANTHA PADMANABHASWAMY TEMPLE IN THIRUVANANTHAPURAM, KERALA, CAPTURED WORLD HEADLINES

WHEN VAST WEALTH WAS DISCOVERED IN ITS VAULTS, CATALYZING IT TO THE POSITION OF THE WORLD'S RICHEST TEMPLE. THE WEALTH CAME TO LIGHT AS A RESULT OF ON-GOING LITIGATION CONCERNING CONTROL OF THE ANCIENT TEMPLE. THE SUPREME COURT OF INDIA ORDERED AN INVENTORY OF THE TEMPLE'S SIX SACRED VAULTS. FOUR OF THE VAULTS, WHICH ARE OPENED REGULARLY, CONTAINED NO SURPRISES. THE REMAINING TWO, DENOTED A AND B BY THE COURT AND SAID TO BE UNOPENED FOR CENTURIES, CAUSED GREAT EXCITEMENT.

A MEDIA FRENZY ENDED AFTER VAULT A WAS OPENED IN THE PRESENCE OF A COMMITTEE APPOINTED BY THE COURT. HEAPS OF GOLD COINS, HUNDREDS OF BIG GOLD CHAINS, CROWNS, DEITIES AND OTHER PRECIOUS VALUABLES OF ANTIQUITY LAY BURIED UNDER BROKEN DUSTY CABINETS. NEWS OF THE "TREASURE" DOMINATED TV SCREENS AND NEWSPAPERS. IN NO TIME, FAKE PHOTOS CIRCULATED ON THE INTERNET. RUMORED FIGURES OF THE

VALUE OF THE WEALTH NEARED 38 BILLION DOLLARS. THE FLOW OF MISINFORMATION, SO-CALLED EXPERT ANALYSIS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR USE OF THIS WEALTH HAVE CONTINUED SINCE. THE SUPREME COURT EXPLICITLY REJECTED ALL HYPOTHETICAL ESTIMATES VALUING THE FIND: "WHAT IS APPEARING IN THE NEWSPAPERS IS JUST SURMISES AND CONJECTURES."

THE TEMPLE, LOCATED AT KERALA'S SOUTHERN END, IS A TRUST MANAGED AND ADMINISTRATED BY THE ERSTWHILE ROYAL FAMILY OF TRAVANCORE, THE FORMER PRINCELY STATE OF THE AREA. THE TEMPLE DEITY, LORD VISHNU, IS REPRESENTED BY SRI PADMANABHA RECLINING ON THE SERPENT ANANTHA. THE UNUSUAL, 18-FOOT-LONG MURTI IS MADE OF 12,000 SHALIGRAM STONES BROUGHT FROM THE GANDAKI RIVER IN NEPAL.

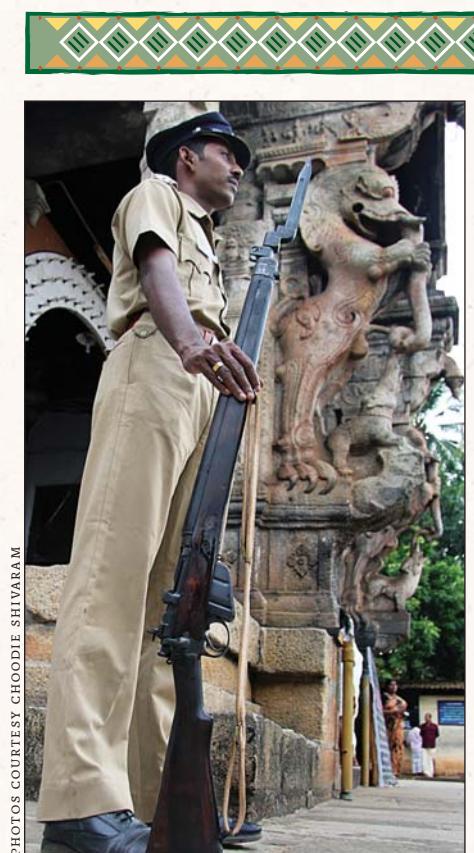
INDIAN LAW ALLOWS A STATE GOVERNMENT TO SEIZE CONTROL OF A RELIGIOUS INSTITUTION THAT IS BEING MISMANAGED. AS A RESULT, FOR EXAMPLE, NEARLY ALL THE TEMPLES IN TAMIL NADU, INCLUDING THE INCOMPARABLE CHIDAMBARAM TEMPLE—ARE NOW UNDER STATE CONTROL. [HINDUISM TODAY, WHICH HAS FOLLOWED THIS

ISSUE SINCE THE 1980S, HAS NEVER DISCOVERED A CASE WHERE THE LAW WAS USED TO SEIZE AN INSTITUTION OF ANY OTHER RELIGION.]

### History of the Case

In 2007, T. P. Sundara Rajan and Sri Padmanabhan brought a case claiming mismanagement and misappropriation of the temple assets. On January 31, 2011, Kerala's High Court ordered that control of the temple pass to the State. The royal family appealed to India's Supreme Court, which responded by ordering an inventory of the temple's assets.

After opening vault A on June 28 and inspecting its riches, the committee observed a snake insignia on the door of vault B—a warning that opening it is prohibited by divine sanction. Many fear that opening the vault could lead to calamity for the city and personal harm to the royal family. This omen gained credence even among skeptics when one original petitioner, T. P. Sundara Rajan, died just days after the opening of vault A. His untimely demise led to comparisons



PHOTOS COURTESY CHOOIDE SHIVARAM



**A glimpse into India's past riches:** (far left) Erstwhile Maharaja Uthradom Marthanda Varma in the traditional royal cap, jewelry and sword of his 18th century ancestor, Marthanda Varma, in procession at the Sree Padmanabhaswamy Temple; this Enfield-toting guard is part of a dramatically increased security presence at the temple; temple's main gopuram shines golden in the morning sun.

with the supposed curse upon those who, in 1922, opened the tomb of the Egyptian King Tutankhamun—which was also guarded by the image of a snake. Sundara Rajan's death, interpreted as divine retribution, caused considerable alarm in the city.

Before the court's judgment regarding the opening vault B, several respected astrologers sought to divine the will of the Deity by conducting a ceremony called Ashtamangala Devaprasnam at the request of the royal family. They reported that the contents of vault A had been defiled by the investigation and that opening Vault B would incur the Deity's displeasure. Initial attempts to open Vault B in July failed and, to date, no further attempt has been made.

### My First-Hand Report

In September, I requested assignment from HINDUISM TODAY to go to Kerala and explore the situation. I found the topic on everyone's mind in Trivandrum. Many sided with the royal family, who are held in the highest regard here. Some told me that Sundara Rajan's case had been vindictive in nature, that he was unhappy with his treatment by temple officers and sought revenge on the Maharaja, Uthradom Tirunal Marthanda Varma. The second petitioner, Padmanabhan, is a temple worker who was suspended for alleged misconduct.

I learned how deep feelings are running there when I asked my taxi driver if he thought the Maharaja was stealing the tem-

ple's wealth, as accused. He stopped short in the busy road, angrily slapped his head and let out a stream of Malayalam curses against those questioning the Maharaja's honesty. I took that as a "No."

### Staking Claim to the Treasure

When the Supreme Court ordered the opening of the six vaults on June 18, 2011, they appointed a seven-member expert committee headed by C. V. Ananda Bose, the director general of National Museums. The committee included representatives of the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI), the Reserve Bank of India (RBI), retired judges of the Kerala High Court, the Maharaja and Jaya Kumar, the high-ranking Additional Chief Secretary of Kerala's state government.

The reports of vault A's contents generated an avalanche of suggestions on what do with the wealth—even though the Chief Minister of Kerala, Oommen Chandy, stated, "No part of the wealth belongs to any person except the Deity, Lord Padmanabhaswamy."

Under Indian law, the Deity of a temple is a "juridical person," and all of the temple properties and wealth are held in the Deity's name.

This principle was honored even under British rule. (Recently London courts reaffirmed the principle in the case of a 12th-century Nataraja murti that had been stolen from the ancient Pathur Temple in Tamil Nadu. Police confiscated the Deity from the British Museum in 1982, and it was eventually returned to India.)

At stake in the Padmanabha Temple case is not the right to own the wealth, but the control of it, and of the temple itself, both of which are now under the royal family's oversight. Several such government takeovers (such as that of the Tiruvattar Kesava Perumal temple in Tamil Nadu) have been followed by systematic looting of the temple's wealth by persons in connivance with the priests. Tiruvattar, which belonged to the same royal family, was known to be richer than Padmanabhaswamy Temple. In the 1990s it came to light that a huge amount of gold decorations for the Deity had been replaced with copper plates. It is speculated that the temple has vaults similar to those at Padmanabha.

Kerala's Communist Party Leader, V. S. Achutanandan, an atheist, claimed that the Padmanabha wealth belongs to the people and demanded it be used for social welfare programs. Others suggested displaying the sacred treasures and murtis in a Louvre-like museum. Some advocated an auction, with the proceeds going toward education, development, roads or even reduction of India's national debt.

Shashi Tharoor, a member of parliament from Trivandrum and a former Foreign Affairs Minister, told a local news channel, "I object to those who are anxious to be generous with other people's money. It's important that we honor the sanctity of the temple and its possessions. It is the symbol of the city."

Central to the petitioners' request for takeover of the temple is the claim that the tem-



ple was always under control of a committee, and not the king. The committee consisted of six brahmins and a secretary and was presided over by the Namboodiri Chief Priest. These eight members—called the *Ettara Yoganam* and appointed by the king—managed the temple. *Ettara* means “eight” and *ara* (for *arasam*) means “king.” Shungoony Menon, author of *A History of Travancore*, mistranslated *ettara* as “eight and a half,” claiming that the king had only a half vote in temple affairs. This reference was used by the petitioners to argue that the king held only nominal power, and thus, could not assert control of the temple.

In a joint statement, experts Prof. Shashibhusan, Dr. Raja and Uma, countered this claim, saying, “No voting system ever existed, there are no records to show that this 8-1/2 voting, or any voting system existed. This is a completely English concept that had influenced the writer’s opinions and is a distortion of history.” Other scholars, including Elankulam Kunjanan Pillai and Dr. A.G. Menon, also dismissed Shungoony Menon’s half-vote theory.

#### Tight Security. Or Is It?

It will take at least a year to catalog, analyze and individually value the contents of vault A. Since all of the items are antiquities, their value is exceptional, but no list and not a single photo has been released to the public (though there are bogus photos circulating on the Internet). The small amount of valid information that is known is said to have been leaked in breach of confidentiality by an over-enthusiastic committee member or by petitioner Sundara Rajan, who eagerly dressed the media upon exiting the vault.

The royal family was displeased with the leaks. Princess Aswathi Thirunal Gouri Lakshmi Bayi, niece of the present Maharaja, told me, “He or his representatives would come out and regularly give details to the press. Sundara Rajan was a police officer and should have been aware of the security concerns. It’s surprising that he was not prevented from talking. But then, the BBC acknowledged Ananda Padmanabhan, Sundara Rajan’s lawyer, as being one of those who revealed details. We informed the court through our representatives that there was a serious security threat with this breach.”

Nearly 40 persons were involved in the inspection of vault A. They included jewelers brought in to weigh the ornaments, technicians supplying oxygen to the underground chambers and security personnel. Each person represented an increased risk of leaks. As a result, security in the area has been greatly increased, to the considerable inconvenience of local residents. A five-kilometer wide “sanitized” zone has been established in which vehicles may be searched and no



GOOGLE EARTH

construction is allowed.

Jaya Kumar, the government representative on the court-appointment committee, summed matters up for HINDUISM TODAY in an exclusive interview: “No one is claiming the treasure, neither the State nor the royal family. It is not palace property, but has been offered to the Lord Himself.”

Jaya Kumar defended the need for an inventory, saying it would prevent future thefts, and that it is the State’s responsibility to guard the treasure, now that they know about it. Throughout the court case, he explained, the government has taken the position that the temple was well run, and there was no need for intervention.

He criticized the premature publicity by other committee members. “I feel that one mistake some of the observers made was sharing their feelings about the find in public. I wasn’t awestruck by the jewels and ornaments. I was just doing my duty. Only after the news broke did my wife ask me why I hadn’t mentioned any of the riches in the vaults and wondered why I was so stoic about it. Now it is up to the court what to do with the treasures.”

#### The Vaults

The vaults (*kalaras* in Malayalam) are inconspicuously tucked around the perimeter of the sanctum sanctorum. “Common people who have no connection with the temple will not know these are the vaults,” noted Dr. R. P. Raja, a senior scholar and historian. “According to temple protocol, three people are necessary to open these vaults. The keys to the vault are held in a safe in a strongroom in the temple. The key to the safe is with the maharaja, and the key to the strongroom is with the princess. The executive officer, the representative of the maharaja, the treasurer, and at least 12 people on duty whose names are registered are required to be present

whenever the vaults are opened, and these are clearly documented.”

Two vaults on the northwestern side are opened eight times a year to bring out ornaments and other items for special festivals. Two other vaults house puja items for daily use. Temple sources state the vaults under contention, vaults A and B, were never opened, as there was no need to do so.

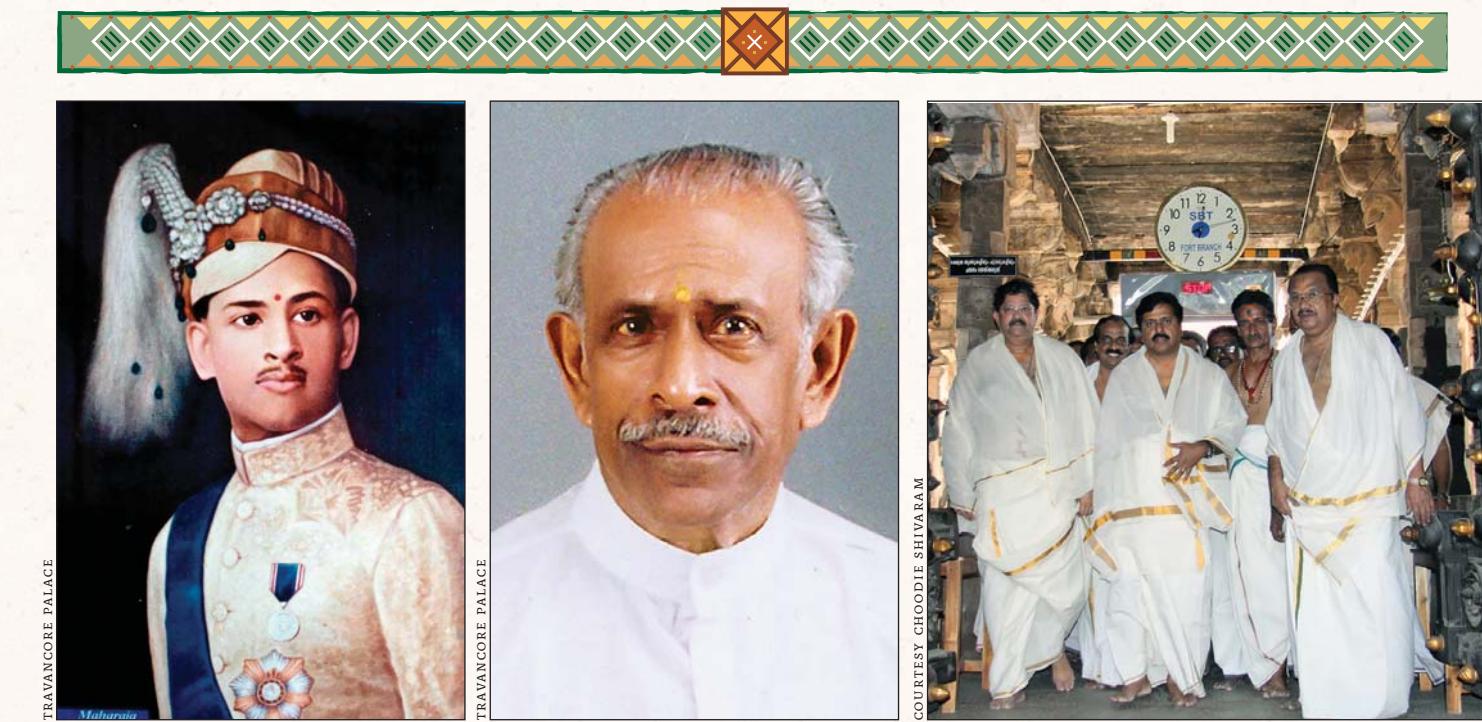
On entering vault A, the team found an empty, dusty room in which they discovered a hatch in the floor and steps leading to an underground chamber containing the wealth. They also tried at that time to open vault B, but the key failed to work. Now, in addition to trepidation occasioned by the serpent image, there are concerns that opening vault B’s heavy door may result in structural damage.

Princess Gouri Lakshmi Bayi told HINDUISM TODAY, “None of us has been inside the vaults. We knew that Padmanabha was rich, but not to what extent. Even Uncle A did not know about the contents of vault A. The find came as a huge surprise to us all.”

#### The Royal Family

The temple has an archive of 3,000 palm-leaf bundles. They contain records of donations, rituals, festivals, royal adoptions, appointments and even minor altercations among the staff. Some of the bundles are Palace Manuals, which contain detailed instructions to the royal family for observance of rituals, donations, traditions and conventions, including the royal adoptions, which are a major feature of Travancore history.

One manual states, for instance, that the king must visit Padmanabha every day to report the day’s developments and duties performed. Any default in this incurs a penance—a fine payable to the Deity. To this day, the aging Maharaja visits the temple at 7:30 am and spends ten minutes in front of the Deity, reporting to Him as a humble servant.



TRAVANCORE PALACE

TRAVANCORE PALACE

COURTESY CHOOIDE SHIVARAM

**Rights and riches:** (left to right) Areal photo shows relative location of temple, royal palace and temple tank; Chittira Tirunal Rama Varma (1912-1991), last ruling maharaja of the princely state of Travancore; Uthradom Marthanda Varma (1922-) present maharaja; members of the committee appointed by the Supreme Court exit the temple after inspecting the vaults

families in India today, the Travancore family has eschewed political involvement. They live a life of piety and frugality and are revered here by high and low alike. Recent allegations have been painful to the family.

Anantha Krishna, a journalist with one of India’s premier dailies, told me, “If the royals really had been looting the temple as alleged, they would have been living in pomp and splendor. Look at the Kaudiar palace. It is badly in need of maintenance, which obviously means huge expenditure. Yet, they are spending out of their personal finances to maintain the temple.” Now the court proceedings have placed further financial strain on the family’s resources.

#### Conclusion

Other temples with royal patronage may have had similar stores of wealth, but these have been lost to looting and thieving—not just by the invaders, but by our own people as well. The temples are now a pale shadow of their glorious past. It is a testament to the devotion of its guardians that the Padmanabhaswamy wealth has been preserved.

I spoke to innumerable people in Thiruvananthapuram: auto drivers, the guest house staff, officials, devotees, shopkeepers, laypersons on the street, historians, temple workers, government officials, businessmen and film stars. There was no division of opinion or question about the royal family’s integrity or devotion to Padmanabhaswamy. “Everyone knows the Maharaja and his family are

totally honest, and even those criticizing them secretly agree that their integrity is of the highest order,” offered one of the communist union workers.

If this sort of takeover attempt were aimed at a religious center of any other religion, one can easily imagine the worldwide expression of outrage that would ensue. A 2003 attempt by the Kerala government to merely inventory the wealth of the state’s Christian churches was canceled after a storm of protests from church officials. But most Hindu organizations have been silent in the matter of Padmanabhaswamy temple.

Prof. Shashi Bhushan said, “This is the worst I have seen in my life. Very few Hindu organizations are concerned over these developments; they think this is a Padmanabhaswamy temple affair. No, it’s not just the temple. It’s the very foundation of Hindu faith that is being shaken. This is exposing the disunity of Hindus, and this worries me.”

The princess expresses the steadfastness of her family: “We have to wait and watch how things will evolve, but the family is united in this: that our seva to the temple is of paramount importance. The moment I go into the temple, it supersedes all the turbulence and trauma that defies expression.”

When the mythical ocean of milk was churned for the nectar of immortality, poison emerged first. In case of Sri Padmanabhaswamy Temple, a great deal of venom has been spewed; we can only wait for the ambrosia to follow.

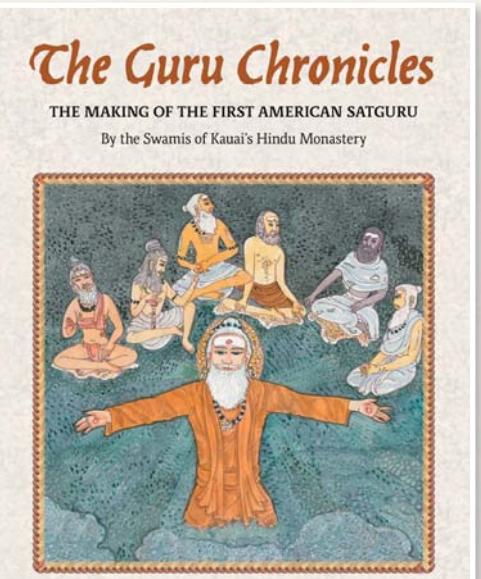
## A Lineage of Mystic Masters

**A**NYONE ON THE SPIRITUAL PATH knows it is rare that the illumined lives of yogis and gurus are laid before us. We have but a handful: *Autobiography of a Yogi*; *Milarepa: Tibet's Great Yogi*; *Ramakrishna and His Disciples* and a few others. Now comes *The Guru Chronicles*, filled with the magical and mystical stories of seven masters of an ancient lineage—five from recent times and two from long ago. The swamis at Kauai's Hindu Monastery in Hawaii—that would be us, the editors of Hinduism Today—began this labor of love 39 years ago, so we can't be accused of a hurried effort. All our writing and design skills from decades of experience are on display in this 832-page ride through 2,200 years of our gurus' history.

We know how to tell a tale (if we do say so ourselves) but we also knew when to step aside and let the great sages speak for themselves, quoting directly and often from the masters' own oral and written legacies. This brings an intimacy and immediacy to the stories. You are hearing about God directly from those who knew God within.

The book would be a unique accomplishment if that was all there was, but the precious illustrations graciously supplement the engaging text. The late S. Rajam sequestered himself for two years in a tiny studio in Chennai, crafting hundreds of paintings, all grounded in the South Indian art language.

As the book begins, a young man, who will one day become Satguru Sivaya Subramuni-



The illustrated stories of Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami, his guru Siva Yogaswami and five preceding masters, who all held truth in the palm of their hand and inspired slumbering souls to "Know thy Self"

yaswami (1927–2001), sails to India and Sri Lanka in 1947 aboard the first vessel to leave America after World War II. He is off to find his guru. After years of arduous training, he falls at the feet of the Tamil master, Siva Yogaswami of Jaffna. Following his guru's orders, the enlightened yogi returns to America to teach the path to God Realization.

Hinduism's many guru lineages are the spiritual rivers that pass the power on through the ages. The story hearkens back

to the progenitor of Subramuniyaswami's lineage, Maharishi Nandinatha, some 2,200 years ago in the Himalayas, then tells of his disciple, Rishi Tirumular. Jumping forward to the 19th century, the authors weave together the histories of a nameless Rishi from the Himalayas, the magic-making Kadaitswami, an unkempt sage named Chellappaswami and his disciple Siva Yogaswami before returning to the story of our modern sage, Sivaya Subramuniyaswami.

Hindu history is replete with stories of noble souls who are born to uplift and guide mankind. Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami was born in modern times to meet modern challenges—born, as he would say, "to protect, preserve and promote the Saiva Dharma," to bring the knowledge, worship and realization of God Siva into the 21st century.

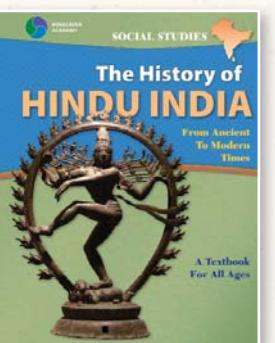
Those close to Gurudeva, as he was affectionately known, saw his communion with the inner worlds, experienced his life of revelation and realization. He looked and acted like Siva Himself, tall, powerful, compassionate, urgent. He did things people don't do: created a new language, talked to the light-bodied devas, established America's first South Indian monastery, founded Hinduism's first international magazine (which you hold in your hands) to cultivate an abiding solidarity among all Hindus, saw and then recreated the future. Little wonder he was chosen by Yogaswami to carry on the Nandinatha Kailasa lineage. Little wonder he was recognized in the East as the West's first authentic satguru. Everything he did was to meet a need, to elevate consciousness, to preserve Hindu dharma for the future—not the nearest future, but the far future of thousands of years, what he loved to call "the future of futures."

THE GURU CHRONICLES, BY THE SWAMIS OF KAUAI'S HINDU MONASTERY, ISBN 978-1-934145-39-5 (HARDCOVER), 978-1-934145-40-1 (EBOOK), HIMALAYAN ACADEMY, 107 KAHOLALE ROAD, KAPAA, HI 96746 USA, \$59.95. [WWW.MINIMELA.COM](http://WWW.MINIMELA.COM)

## Hindu History For Schools

**T**HE EDITORS OF HINDUISM TODAY HAVE just released *The History of India from Ancient to Modern Times*, written in collaboration with Dr. Shiva Bajpai, Professor Emeritus of History, University of California Northridge. It is a richly informative and entertaining book for Hindus and non-Hindus alike. Written for 6th and 7th grade, it is formatted as a typical textbook for these grade levels and includes exercises, tests, glossary and index, along a Hindu festival supplement.

The first chapter starts with the threads of Hindu practice evident in the Indus-Sarasvati civilization, the largest and, in many ways,



the most advanced of the ancient civilizations. This chapter covers Indian history to 300 ce and describes the major aspects of the Hindu religion. The next chapter traces the development of Hinduism through the early empires of India, a time of great advances in science, architecture, art and literature—during which Europe was experiencing the Middle Ages. The third chapter covers the years of trial by invasion and the Hindu response in the Bhakti Movement. The fourth is on the mixed blessings of life as a British colony, which left what was once the world's richest nation impoverished. The fifth chapter opens with India's hard-won independence, its development

into the world's largest democracy and third most powerful nation, and the spread of Hindus to nearly every country of the world. The book highlights the people, philosophical ideas and religious practices of each period that are key to the Hindu religion today.

The 128-page book, which includes many photographs, will be useful in public middle schools, temple classes and even college courses. It is an accurate, terse but comprehensive presentation of the world's most ancient faith and the history of India.

THE HISTORY OF HINDU INDIA, BY THE EDITORS OF HINDUISM TODAY MAGAZINE AND DR. SHIVA BAJPAI, ISBN 978-1-934145-38-8 (HARDCOVER), 978-1-934145-41-8 (EBOOK), HIMALAYAN ACADEMY, 107 KAHOLALE ROAD, KAPAA, HI 96746 USA, \$19.95. [WWW.MINIMELA.COM](http://WWW.MINIMELA.COM)

## Protecting Hinduism

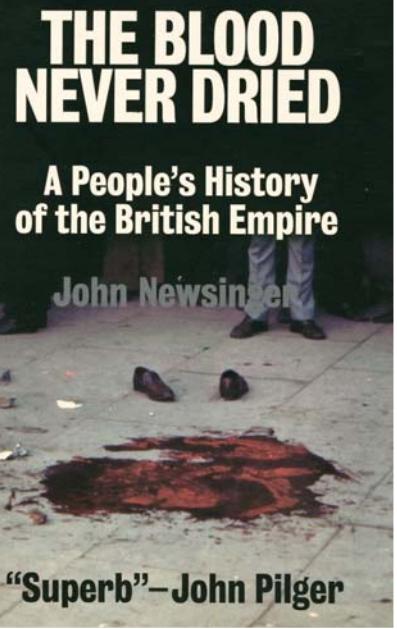
**A**FTER CHRISTIANITY and Islam, Hinduism is the world's largest religion and the largest of the non-Biblical traditions. While missionaries are virtually banned in China and in Islamic countries, in India they are typically tolerated, respected and given a wide scope of activity. Since Christianity is in decline, particularly in Europe, it has a need to find new converts, for which India is one of the main potential locations, particularly as a comparatively high percentage of Hindu converts are willing to become priests and nuns. Pope John Paul II, in a trip to India some ten years ago, spoke directly of looking for a "rich harvest of souls in the third millennium in Asia," specifically India.

Yet most Hindus and groups sympathetic to them are not aware of this "siege on Hinduism" that continues unrelenting as part of the multinational missionary business. In this context, Stephen Knapp's well-documented, deftly written book, *Crimes Against India: and the Need to Protect its Ancient Vedic Tradition*, is most timely. The siege has been going on since the first Islamic armies and Christian missionaries entered India, as he clearly delineates, and has continued in various forms, violent, subversive or even charitably based.

EXCERPT FROM REVIEW BY DR. DAVID FRAWLEY  
CRIMES AGAINST INDIA: AND THE NEED TO PROTECT ITS ANCIENT VEDIC TRADITION, BY STEPHEN KNAPP, ISBN 978-1-44011158-7, JUNIVERSE, 1663 LIBERTY DRIVE, BLOOMINGTON, IN 47403 USA, \$24.95. [BOOKSTORE.JUNIVERSE.COM](http://BOOKSTORE.JUNIVERSE.COM)



1020 Years of Attacks Against Hindus and What to do About It  
Stephen Knapp



"Superb"—John Pilger

## Shocking Truths

**I**N THE BLOOD NEVER DRIED, JOHN NEWSINGER OFFERS short, sharp pieces on moments and places of the British Empire. We read how the government decided that the free market would solve the Irish Potato Famine of 1846, resulting in a million deaths. We discover how the British murdered their way from Egypt to China; how, in the interests of free trade they fought two vicious wars for the right to sell opium to the Chinese and raped, pillaged and plundered the country.

The "Jewel in the Crown" of the Empire, India, makes for several interesting chapters documenting how the manner of British rule led directly to the uprising of 1857—Newsinger calls the event an uprising rather than a mutiny, as it is normally termed.

Newsinger argues that the brutal nature of the uprising, described with glee in the media of the time, was only brutal because it was a response to the violence of British rule up to that point. He quotes Karl Marx, writing at the time that however violent the action of the rebels, "It is only the reflex, in a concentrated form, of England's own conduct in India, not only during the epoch of the foundation of her Eastern Empire, but even during the last ten years of a long-settled rule." The violence of the British troops in putting down the revolt—often glorified as bravery and worthy of many medals—was characteristic of all of Britain's colonial rules.

EXCERPT WITH PERMISSION FROM A REVIEW BY MARTIN EMPSON AT RESOLUTEREADER.BLOGSPOT.COM  
THE BLOOD NEVER DRIED, BY JOHN NEWSINGER, ISBN 1-905192-12-6, BOOKMARKS PUBLICATIONS, 1 BLOOMSBURY STREET, LONDON WC1B 3QE, UK, £11.99. [WWW.BOOKMARKSBOOKSHOP.CO.UK](http://WWW.BOOKMARKSBOOKSHOP.CO.UK)

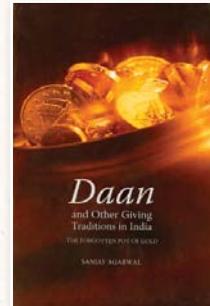


REMEMBERED RHYTHMS: ESSAYS ON DIASPORA AND THE MUSIC OF INDIA, EDITED BY SHUBHA CHAUDHURI AND ANTHONY SEEGER, ISBN 978-1-905422-50-0, SEAGULL BOOKS, DISTRIBUTED BY THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO PRESS, \$29.00. [PRESS.UCHICAGO.EDU](http://PRESS.UCHICAGO.EDU)

## All About Giving

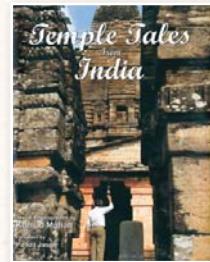
**I**N A FAST-MODERNIZING SOCIETY, ARE THE old giving traditions doomed to die, or can these also be modernized and revived, helping fund the financial needs of a vibrant development sector? Sanjay Agarwal's *Daan and Other Giving Traditions in India* takes a close look at the varied traditions of charity among the orthodox. Priya Viswanath of Dana Asia writes, "At the onset, it is a work that takes the reader back to the basics in terms of understanding giving traditions...in various milieus." Mark Sidel of the University of Iowa adds, "Faith-based giving... needs to be better understood on its own terms, and in the diverse and changing forms in which it is practiced today in India if we are to have even the hope of a comprehensive understanding of the complex tapestry that is giving and philanthropy in India. [This] volume is of exceptional value for its discussion of the doctrine and history underlying these faith-based motivations for charity and philanthropy, as well as for the detail of the research presented."

DAAN AND OTHER GIVING TRADITIONS IN INDIA, BY SANJAY AGARWAL, ISBN 978-8-191085-40-2, ACCOUNTAID, 55-B, POCKET C, SIDDHARTH EXTENSION, NEW DELHI, INDIA, RS 500, [WWW.ACCOUNTAID.NET](http://WWW.ACCOUNTAID.NET)



## Temple Tales of India

**I**NDIA, A LAND WHERE WHOLE VILLAGES and towns are dedicated to God, has also been home to millions of temples large and small that have arisen over thousands of years. These edifices beckon believers and non-believers alike—by their sheer beauty if not their spiritual magnetism. As Mark Twain said, Indian pilgrimages sanctified by temples are "older than history, older than tradition, older even than legend." Each of these temples has a story to tell.



The author, who traveled across India with her notebook and camera, relates little-known stories, from hidden caves in the Himalayas to shimmering seas in the South, to a holy lake in the midst of a desert—in a refreshingly readable and adventurous manner. Eminent musician Pandit Jasraj, who wrote the foreword, comments, "This book is a beautiful piece of art created in search of the ultimate creativity: God."

TEMPLE TALES FROM INDIA, BY KUMUD MOHAN, NEW DELHI 110 049, INDIA, \$79.00, [KUMUDMOHAN@GMAIL.COM](mailto:KUMUDMOHAN@GMAIL.COM)

OBITUARY

## Honoring a Master Architect Who Changed the Landscape of India

Dr. Vaidyanatha Ganapati Sthapati passes away at age 84 in Chennai

**H**E DID NOT START OUT TO BE A TEMPLE architect, even though trained in the art by his famed father, Sri Vaidyanatha Sthapati. Rather, son Ganapati took up a career teaching mathematics. But as the Tamil poet Valluvar wrote, "Though you cast it aside, what destiny calls yours will not depart." In 1957, at the age of 30, he joined the Tamil Nadu government temple board to oversee temple designs and construction. Thus began a lifetime of creative and innovative accomplishments. Eventually, he founded the Vastu Vedic Trust and embarked on a remarkable career.

Sthapati passed away September 6, 2011, at a hospital in Chennai, after several years of failing health. He is survived by his wife, G. Dakshinavathi, who now serves as founder trustee of the trust ([www.vastuved.com](http://www.vastuved.com)). His nephew, K. Dakshinamoorthy Sthapati, is the managing trustee. Additional trustees are M. Palaniswamy Sthapati and S. Perumal Sthapati. All worked closely with him during his lifetime. In addition, his legacy is carried on by several trained sthapatis, including his nephew and life-long apprentice, R. Selvana-

than of Chennai, and hundreds of architectural graduates and stone carvers.

V. Ganapati Sthapati hails from 30 generations of stone carvers and builders of the Vishwabrahmin family. He is a lineal descendant of Kunjara Mallan Raja Raja Perunthachan, who was commissioned by Rajaraja Chola I to build the Brihadisvara Temple to Lord Siva in Thanjavur, Tamil Nadu. That temple, completed in 1010 ce, remains one of the largest in all of India.

Sthapati's accomplishments are famous and many. The Valluvar Kottam in Chennai and the Valluvar statue at Kanya Kumari honor the great Tamil saint who composed the *Tirukural*. Working closely with Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami for several decades, Sthapati designed Iraivan Temple here in Hawaii at the headquarters of HINDUISM TODAY, one of only two all-stone Hindu temples built anywhere in the last hundred years. (The other is Sthapati's temple to Subramaniam in Delhi.) In addition, he designed and built the Tamil University in Thanjavur and other secular buildings.

In 1961 he followed his father as principal

of the Government College of Architecture and Sculpture, Mamallapuram. The college had been founded just four years earlier to issue degrees in Vastu Shastra under the auspices of the University of Madras. This formal recognition of the traditional arts within the modern education system has done much to restore and elevate the status of Hindu architecture in today's India.

For 27 years Ganapati Sthapati meticulously trained three generations of temple architects, sculptors and carvers. He taught them, too, the profound mystical side of the silpi tradition—how to create not just sculptures, but the very body of God. During his tenure, he oversaw the construction of dozens of temples and the carving of thousands of sculptures. He authored books on the philosophical principles of *Sthapatya Veda* and *Saiva Agamas* and offered practical examples of, as he termed it, the creation of rhythm-bound forms that give rise to structures.

After retiring in 1988, he launched a private practice and was commissioned to build temples—not only in India but everywhere Hindus had settled in the past few decades—



**A lifetime of accomplishments:** (clockwise from left) Sthapati in a thoughtful mood; between Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami and his long-time acolyte, Selvanathan Sthapati, on May 31, 2001, for the laying of the first stone of Iraivan Temple, Kauai, Hawaii; the Valluvar statue at Kanya Kumari, off India's southernmost tip, sits in the ocean next to the Vivekananda Memorial; Kauai's all-stone Iraivan Temple, not yet completed; Valluvar Kottam in Chennai, Sthapati's memorial to the great Tamil saint

in America, England, Singapore, Malaysia, Fiji, Sri Lanka and Canada. His lifetime of work earned him the Padma Bhushan, one of India's highest honors, in 2009.

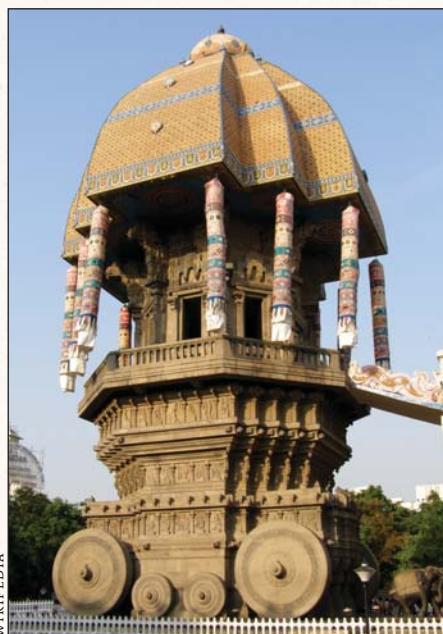
Accomplished artist, sculptor, designer and project manager, Ganapati Sthapati also succeeded at a broader and more meaningful goal: to establish India's ancient construction arts as an important and useful field of knowledge in the 21st century. In the process, he evaluated each aspect of the ancient art in terms of modern methods. The silpis, for example, use simple iron chisels made and maintained by on-site blacksmiths. Sthapati experimented with various metals to replace these iron tools, but ultimately found none an improvement over the traditional, cheap and easily created iron ones. As an alternate to breaking out stones with hand methods, he tried blasting them loose with dynamite. But stones so quarried, he discovered, were subtly shattered by the blast and "lost their tone," making them unsuitable for sculpting.

Noticing the trend toward simpler and simpler sculptures, Sthapati brought forward clever and delicate demonstrations of the stone carver's art, such as the remarkable stone bell and clapper on a stone chain, all carved from a single rock. He made stone chains with large, loose links and created sets of musical pillars, each column designed to ring at a certain tone when struck.

Sthapati avidly explored the philosophical, theoretical and historical traditions of stone carving. This field encompasses all dimensions of architecture, from sculpture design to town planning. He generated renewed interest in the *Vastu Shastras*, the

scriptures of this art, which he had translated into English from the original Sanskrit and ancient Tamil.

Intrigued by the Mayan architecture of South and Central America, Sthapati traveled to that region in 1995, visiting ancient monuments and meeting Mayan representatives. He was astounded by similarities between Mayan and Hindu construction design, right down to the use of the same measurements and proportions (see HINDUISM TODAY, June 1995). Visiting the Incan ruins of Machu Picchu, he measured two ancient structures, a residence and a temple. He confirmed that the floor plans, location of doors and windows, proportions of width to length, roof styles, column sizes and wall thicknesses were identical to those prescribed in the *Vastu Shastras*. It was an astonishing and as yet under-appreciated discovery, still to be explained by modern science; the Mayans and Incas were never known to have been



napati Sthapati, shown holding the temple plans, are surrounded by the artisans and craftsmen performing the various tasks of creating the temple. Thus we honor a man who, fulfilling his duty, preserved and passed on the art of Hindu temple construction to a new generation of skilled craftsmen.

# Beyond My Dual Identities

A young graduate explores the challenges and rewards in her winning essay on "Every day, my Hindu-ness makes me a better American, because..."

BY SOHINI SIRCAR

MANY AMERICAN HINDUS VIEW THEIR LIVES as having two poles. They display their Hindu side at home or at the temple amongst family and their American side at school or work. This dual life—almost like a split personality—can be confusing when the two areas converge. But this is not the only way to live as an American Hindu. In fact, I strongly believe that these two identities are inextricably linked in my existence as a Hindu in the United States.

My Hindu-ness makes me a better American, because I understand that there is a certain essence that links us. Just as understanding that the soul (atman) links the entire universe helps me dispel the illusion of distinctions (maya), understanding the essence of what makes me American helps me look past different skin colors and accents.

During my freshman year of college, I looked into the mirror in my dorm room, and for the first time, I really understood that I have looked and will always look South Asian. By my appearance alone, no one would understand how much I believe in the Constitution and the Bill of Rights. Internally, I face a struggle. In my interest area of international development and health, some day I would like to work for the US government, and even serve as a delegate in international settings. But I also realize that when people look at me, they see a South Asian. And unless I put my pen down to paper or open my mouth to speak, there is no way of conveying my Hindu American identity.

I was forced to consider this dilemma when I recently attended a White House ceremony recognizing the valiant work of Hindus in the Armed Forces. I found myself surprised to wonder how they so bravely pledged their lives for a country their parents had only immigrated to a few decades ago. What makes us so loyal to the US? What keeps us from working for a South Asian country when that is the region from where my genes, faith and culture come from?

Even more recently, in my hunt to find an apartment, I encountered a young woman who, via email, asked me where I was from. Without thinking much, I wrote that I had always lived in the US. She then replied, "Well, where are you originally from?" Looking at that email, I wanted to shout, "America! I was born here!" I realized that was not the answer she was looking for, but why did it matter from which country my parents immigrated if I told her I was American? Regardless of my feelings of my American identity, she refused to accept me due to the foreignness of my name. But that is exactly what makes me a Hindu American.

What does it mean to be Hindu, and what does it mean to be American? And where does the essence of those identities intersect?

My faith helps me understand that while all things in the universe have so many different exteriors, they all have the same atman. What is the similarity between a tree, a human and a mushroom? It



seems like little, since they are not even in the same taxonomic kingdom. By dispelling maya, we find that all beings are created from the same soul.

My dedication to my faith does not take away from my American identity, but instead reinforces this message. I see America as a beautiful potpourri of people and cultures—all with the same soul of liberty, opportunity and freedom. Being American is about having a certain invisible essence that links us to all other Americans, regardless of external appearance. No single external feature in body, voice or movement distinguishes an American. There is no answer to the question of what a "typical" American looks like. All people living on this continent came

as immigrants, and that is what makes the US such a sparkling mix of gems of different colors, shapes and sizes. While human exterior facial features, skin colors and accents can seem to distinguish one person from another, the atman within links the universe together.

These concepts, so intrinsic to my understanding of Hinduism, are also elegantly woven into the fabric of my belief in the American system. Simply based on citizenship, all Americans can vote, are guaranteed a fair trial and are promised protection. This idea that all citizens are equal in the eyes of the US government requires that we disregard the maya of external features and, instead, understand the essence of what makes us all American.

My Hindu and American identities intertwine in such a way that I cannot explain one without the other. These identities teach me to respect all living and nonliving things, and this means that we must treat everything with equality and care. This is beautifully depicted in the illustrated pages of my *Bhagavad Gita*—everything has the same God within it. This concept involves making sure we strive to give everyone access to food, water, shelter and medical care, as the US does through humanitarian assistance.

My belief of this essential equality defines my duty to serve for justice, harmony and peace. This way of thinking has not come from my identity as either a Hindu or an American, but instead as the combined identity of both. This convergence of ideas like justice, atman and equality challenge my ideas of race, religion and nationality, and I strive to fully comprehend that my soul is made of the same essence as everything else. When the world understands this concept, conflicts over mine and yours will end, and peace will pervade.

Every day my Hindu-ness makes me a better American and my American-ness makes me a better Hindu—because they teach me that people and things have the same essence.

SOHINI SIRCAR, 22, a graduate of Georgetown University, will have joined the AmeriCorps VISTA program as of November, 2011. Her essay was one of the winners of the Hindu American Foundation's Next-Gen Essay Contest 2011. Email: [ss696@georgetown.edu](mailto:ss696@georgetown.edu).

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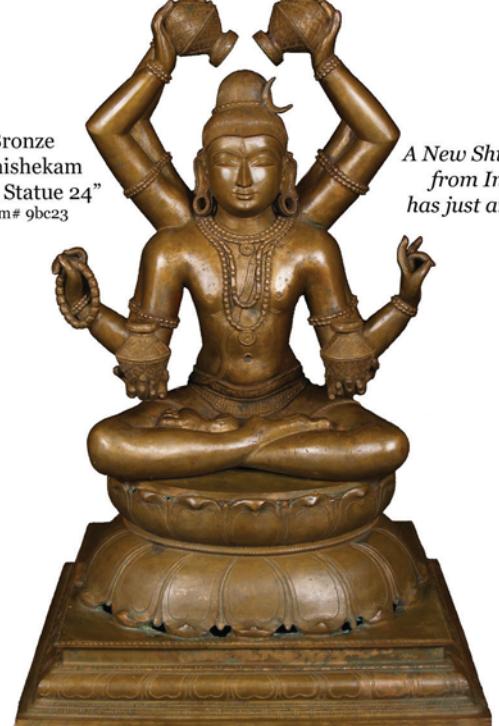
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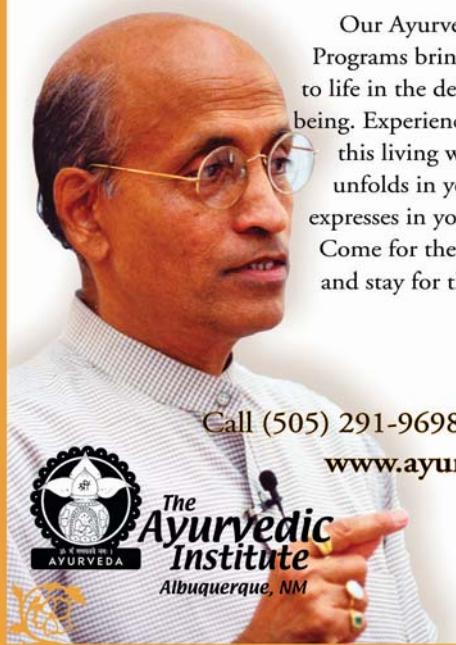


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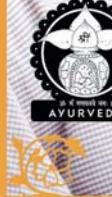
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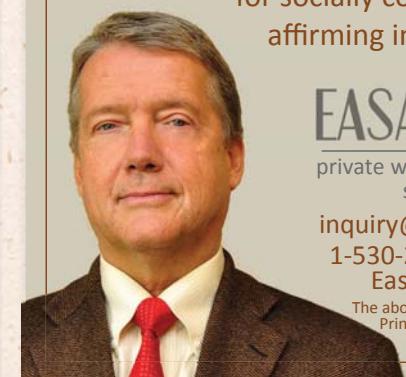
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# Hindu Heritage Endowment

## HONORING GRANDFATHER & SUPPORTING A TEMPLE IN LANKA

Dr. Nadaraja Balasubramanian, a physician practicing in the United States, has powerful personal ties to the Pallampulam Murugamoorthi Kovil, a temple in Saravani, Velanai, an island off the northern coast of Sri Lanka. "The temple was very close to my parents and grandparents," shared Dr. Balasubramanian, a native of Sri Lanka. "When I was ten, my grandfather told me he wanted me to make sure that the temple would be well cared for after their lifetime."



## *Pallampulam Murugamoorthi Kovil, in Velanai, Sri Lanka*

grams. He hopes that the permanent fund will one day produce enough income to pay for temple maintenance well into the future. "HHE is, in my opinion, the best away to make sure that my grandfather's wishes are fulfilled," he said.

Ideally, Dr. Balasubramanian would like to extend his help beyond the temple to the villagers living near it. In 2009, the area began emerging from a prolonged civil war, with Tamil refugees returning and reconstruction starting. This cytopathologist is undaunted by the ambitiousness of his goals. “Faith can move mountains,” he affirmed. “Modern research has shown that telomerase activity, which helps to repair DNA damage, can be significantly affected by chanting, meditation, singing bhajans and doing pujas.”

Dr. Balasubramanian sees the fund as more than a way to honor his grandfather's memory. "Extending one's interests beyond the immediate family is, I believe, an important hallmark of spiritual maturation," he added. "It is the essence of all religions and philosophies."

Dr. Balasubramanian became interested in Vedanta and Hindu philosophy after listening to Swami Dayananda Saraswathi at the Arsha Vidya Gurukulam, an ashram in Saylorsburg, Pennsylvania. Though raised Hindu, he found that study at the ashram "put things in perspective. It changed my vision and enabled me to have a greater understanding and appreciation of the tremendous work done by Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami in Hawaii."

The temple the fund supports traces its roots back some 300 years to a woman named Ammajadiyar who placed a *vel*, or lance, a symbol of victory and knowledge, at what is now the temple site. "Over the years, the site gradually became a temple," Dr. Balasubramanian explained. In 1962, his grandfather, Vellupillai Subramaniam, installed the image of Lord Murugan, a Deity especially revered by Tamil Hindus, in place of the *vel*.

“There is a saying in Tamil,” he explained: “*Kovil illa uril kudi irruka vendam*,” meaning “Do not live in a village where there is no temple.”

If you wish to join Dr. Balasubramanian in contributing to the Pallampulam-Saravani Murgamoorthi Thirukkovil (fund #83) or to create your own fund, contact Shanmuganathaswami at 808-822-3012 ext. 244 or [hhe@hindu.org](mailto:hhe@hindu.org), or give directly at [www.hheonline.org/donate.shtml](http://www.hheonline.org/donate.shtml).

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<b>Kauai Aadheenam Monastic Endowment</b>	Total	7,060.52	<b>Kauai Aadheenam Religious Art and Artifacts Fund</b>	Vinaya Alahan	150.00
Sharad & Namrata Haldwania	101.00		Rajadeva Alahan	Jeri Arin	300.00
Roshan Harilela	375.00		Anurag Sharadendu	Marlene Carter	162.00
Gunasekaran Kandasamy	197.69		Total	Maruthu Pandian Darmalingam	60.00
Natraj Narayanswami	11.00			Rajendra Giri	15.00
Niraj Thaker	76.50			Natraj Narayanswami	14.00
Other Donations	50,000.00			Subramaniam Pennathur	50.01
Total	50,761.19			Purany Ponniah	23.82
<b>Iraivan Temple Endowment</b>				Ganga Sivanathan	150.00
Anonymous	108.00			Sivaruban Sivanesan	150.00
Subareddy & Rani Chintam	51.00			Andrew Stich	300.00
Kiran Davane	51.00			Soma Sundaram	40.00
Latha Kannan	153.00			Niraj Thaker	101.00
Ramrajeeth Kodialbail	1,001.00			Kathleen Whalen	75.00
P. Parameswaran	100.00			Total	4,426.53
Mrunal Patel	1,001.00			<b>Yogaswami Hindu Boys' Home Fund</b>	
Aran Sendan	25.00			Anonymous	374.00
Sankara Skandanatha	120.00			Vinaya Alahan	150.00
Pregassen Soobramaney	60.00			Maruthu Pandian Darmalingam	60.00
Niraj Thaker	76.50			Total	584.00
Other Donations	52,007.65				
Total	54,754.15				
<b>Kauai Aadheenam Annual Archana Fund</b>					
Anonymous	105.00				
S. Arunasalam	72.20				
Sivanathan Batumalai	40.00				
Hemakshesha Naatha Batumallah	6.00				
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Juhivaasana Koorthan	5.32				
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Mangaleswary Vimalanathan	328.00				
Total	3,083.41				
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Bhanaviansankar Krishnamurthy	150.00				
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A. K. Vaithamuththu	240.00				
Siven Veerasamy	87.43				
Mangaleswary Vimalanathan	320.00				
Total Contributions					\$156,272.60
<b>Funds at Market Value, September 30, 2011</b>					
Total Endowment Funds					\$8,859,754.30
Total Pooled Income Funds					\$204,555.38
Grand Total					\$9,064,309.68

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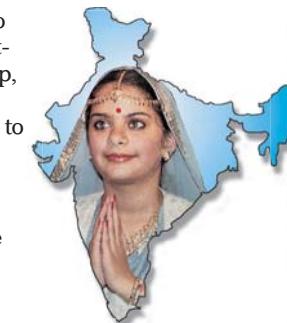
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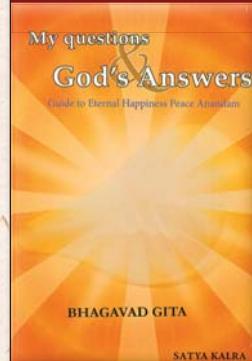
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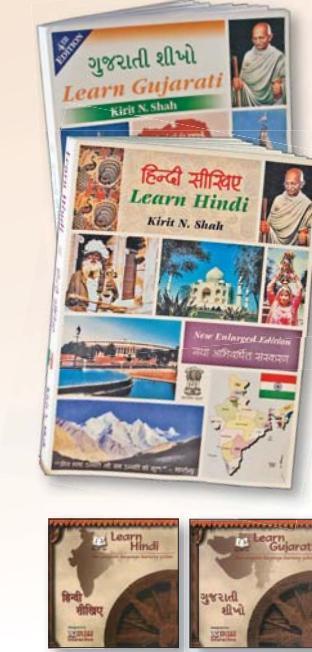
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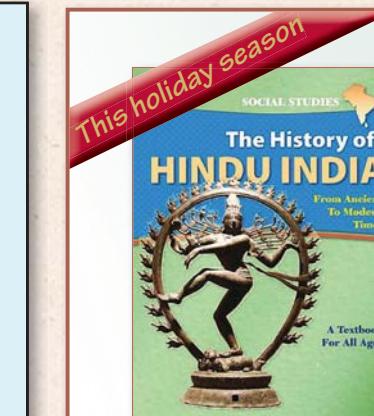
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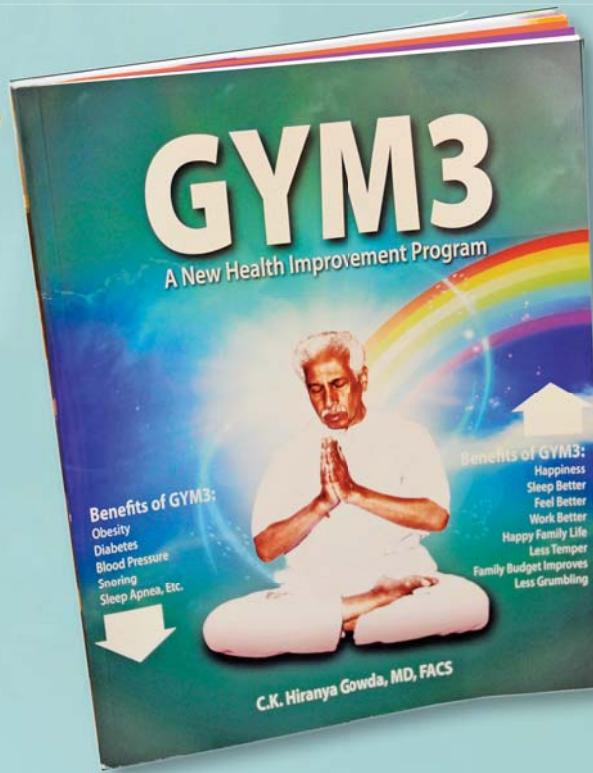


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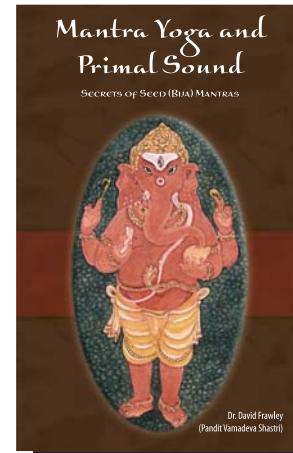
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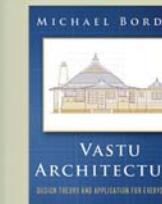
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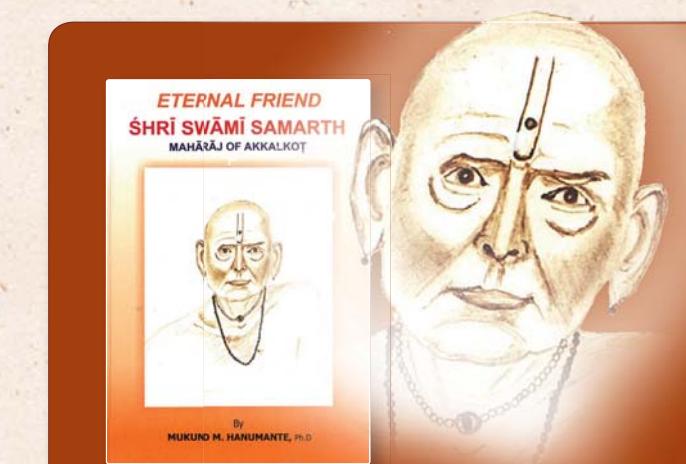


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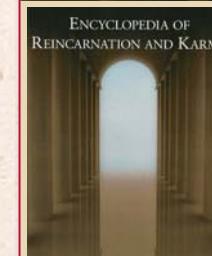
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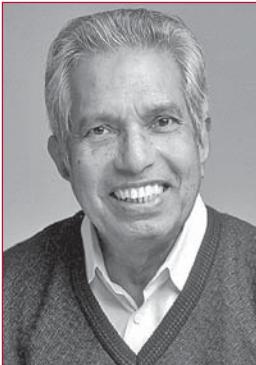
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**Vishwa Dharma Mandalam**

Founder Acharya Swami Ramakrishnananda



We are happy to announce that we have opened a new yoga studio and temple in Astoria, Queens, NY.

Ramakrishnananda yoga center includes a hatha yoga studio and Hindu temple, and offers weekday yoga classes, temple ceremonies and philosophical classes. Our wonderful yoga classes are held Monday – Friday. The first two classes are free for new and existing students, and you are most welcome to join us for arati at 9 pm Monday – Thursday.

We opened our bright and spacious Ramakrishnananda Yoga Vedanta Center in Astoria, a quiet part of Queens that is full of character and just a short subway ride from Manhattan on the Q/N train. Our seven hatha yoga instructors are teaching 18 classes every week and our evening arati (Mon-Thurs) glorifies the temple's beautiful deities – Radhe-Krishna, Durga, Lakshmi, and Saraswati.

**Location:**  
20-29 38th Street, Astoria, NY 11105  
2nd floor  
Tel: (888) 474-1218  
Email: [info@ramakrishnananda.com](mailto:info@ramakrishnananda.com)

**Visit us on the web:**  
[www.RamakrishnanandaYoga.com/Astoria](http://www.RamakrishnanandaYoga.com/Astoria)

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# DIGITAL DHARMA

## BLOGS

### The Fascinating World of Hindus Sharing Online—Hindu Blogs and Forums

BY MADHURI SHEKHAR, LOS ANGELES

BLOG IS SHORT FOR "WEB LOG," A WEBSITE that is updated regularly by an individual or organization with new articles ranging from casual musings to formal essays. Most blogs allow readers to make comments. A *forum* supports multiple subjects, and registered users can contribute to diverse discussions. These sites provide a vehicle for sharing and learning views, knowledge and insight on just about every field, including religion and spirituality. Many Hindus are posting to blogs and sharing on forums. Here is a short selection to get you started. Beware, you may not necessarily agree with everything anyone says, but it is interesting reading, so be prepared to get lost in the world of Hindus talking online.

#### A New Mode of Education

While many blog articles parade as fact, remember these are usually just one person's view. That said, it can't be much worse than most of today's textbooks!

**Hindu-blog** is one of the highest trafficked and most frequently updated blogs on Hinduism, [www.hindu-blog.com](http://www.hindu-blog.com). It covers a wide range of topics, ranging from dates and times of Hindu festivals and occasions,

to questions like "Why is Lord Shiva worshiped in the form of Linga," to quirky facts on the famed Tirupati laddoo. **¶Devdutt Patnaik**, the best-selling author of several books of Hindu legends and stories, regularly posts fascinating articles that often link Hindu teachings with insights into leadership and management. See [devdutt.com/category/topics](http://devdutt.com/category/topics). **¶The Gita Blog**, [gita-blog.blogspot.com](http://gita-blog.blogspot.com), features a wonderful collection of posts on the *Bhagavad Gita*. The author takes up topics of practical interest, such as maintaining a conflict-free mind, and ties it into insights and wisdom from specific verses of the Gita. **¶Om Etc.**, [www.ometc.net](http://www.ometc.net), is a great resource for those looking for the meanings and functions behind Hindu rituals, mantras and philosophy, featuring useful articles such as "The How and Why of Fasting in Hinduism."

**¶The Hindu Dharma Forums** feature lively discussions on all aspects of Hindu life and philosophy: [hindudharmaforums.com](http://hindudharmaforums.com). **¶Agniveer**, [agniveer.com](http://agniveer.com), offers a rationalist and humanist approach to Hinduism, taking a more intellectual bent to questions of faith, such as issues with the caste system and the role of women in Hinduism. **¶**Those interested in issues of public policy and advocacy would do well to follow the blog posts and press releases of the **Hindu American Foundation**, which works to promote a progressive Hindu voice in America. [www.hafsite.org](http://www.hafsite.org)

**Up Close and Personal**  
In many blogs individuals share intimate views from their own lives. **¶Ravi Ladva**, [raviladva.blogspot.com](http://raviladva.blogspot.com), writes from a personal perspective his thoughts and experiences with Hinduism. **¶**One blog, though updated only occasionally,

[www.hinduismtoday.com](http://www.hinduismtoday.com)



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## ARTICLES



River of Rebirth



Rules do not

Why is someone known as "The Destroyer" so revered?

OCT 07, 2011 | 10 COMMENTS

We may have emerged  
can we truly say we

OCT 06, 2011 | 21 CO

carries a remarkable series of posts: the **White Hindu**, [whitehindu.blogspot.com](http://whitehindu.blogspot.com). The author, Ambaa, is an American woman of European ancestry who chronicles her experiences and insights into the faith. Her blog has now been published as a book, *The White Hindu*, which is available on [Amazon.com](http://Amazon.com). **¶Western-Hindu.org**, a comprehensive blog on a British Hindu's views and experiences, maintains an exhaustive list of fellow "Western" Hindu bloggers, at [western-hindu.org/westerners-following-hinduism](http://western-hindu.org/westerners-following-hinduism). **¶Bamboo Thoughts**, [bamboothoughtlemons.blogspot.com](http://bamboothoughtlemons.blogspot.com), is by Art from Kentucky, who belongs to the Ramakrishna Vedanta movement, who details his sadhana on his blog. **¶White Indian Housewife**, [www.whiteindian-housewife.com](http://www.whiteindian-housewife.com), is not a Hindu blog per se. It is a hilarious and charming account of an Australian woman living in India with her Indian husband, detailing her cross-cultural experiences, and the ups and downs of living in India, all with a generous and sweet perspective on life as a whole.

These blogs are by no means a comprehensive list, but can serve as an introductory survey for those looking to explore further Hindu resources online. Don't forget to follow the daily happenings at HINDUISM TODAY's headquarters, **Kauai's Hindu Monastery**, through our blog, "TAKA," at [himalayanacademy.com/blog/taka](http://himalayanacademy.com/blog/taka).

Ohm | Om | Aum

Hinduism: A philosophy, not just a religion

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